

Bedford-Jones
& Robertson

THE TEMPLE OF THE TEN

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GRANT

R. Robertson



THE
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TEMPLE
OF
THE TEN

H. Bedford-Jones

& W. C. Robertson

Set in Asia's vast unknown reaches, back in the stamping grounds of Talbot Mundy and Harold Lamb, THE TEMPLE OF THE TEN is an exciting tale of the mysterious East. Like many a Mundy and Lamb story, it first saw print in the pages of the *Old Adventure* magazine (1921).

The lure of adventure and the unknown lead to the "City of Whirling Sands" and to the "Temple of the Ten Dromedaries," once the realm of the fabled Prester John. Beyond, near the "Lake of Singing Fishes" in a purple-grassed valley, is the abode of the mystic and maniacal telepath, Esrin.

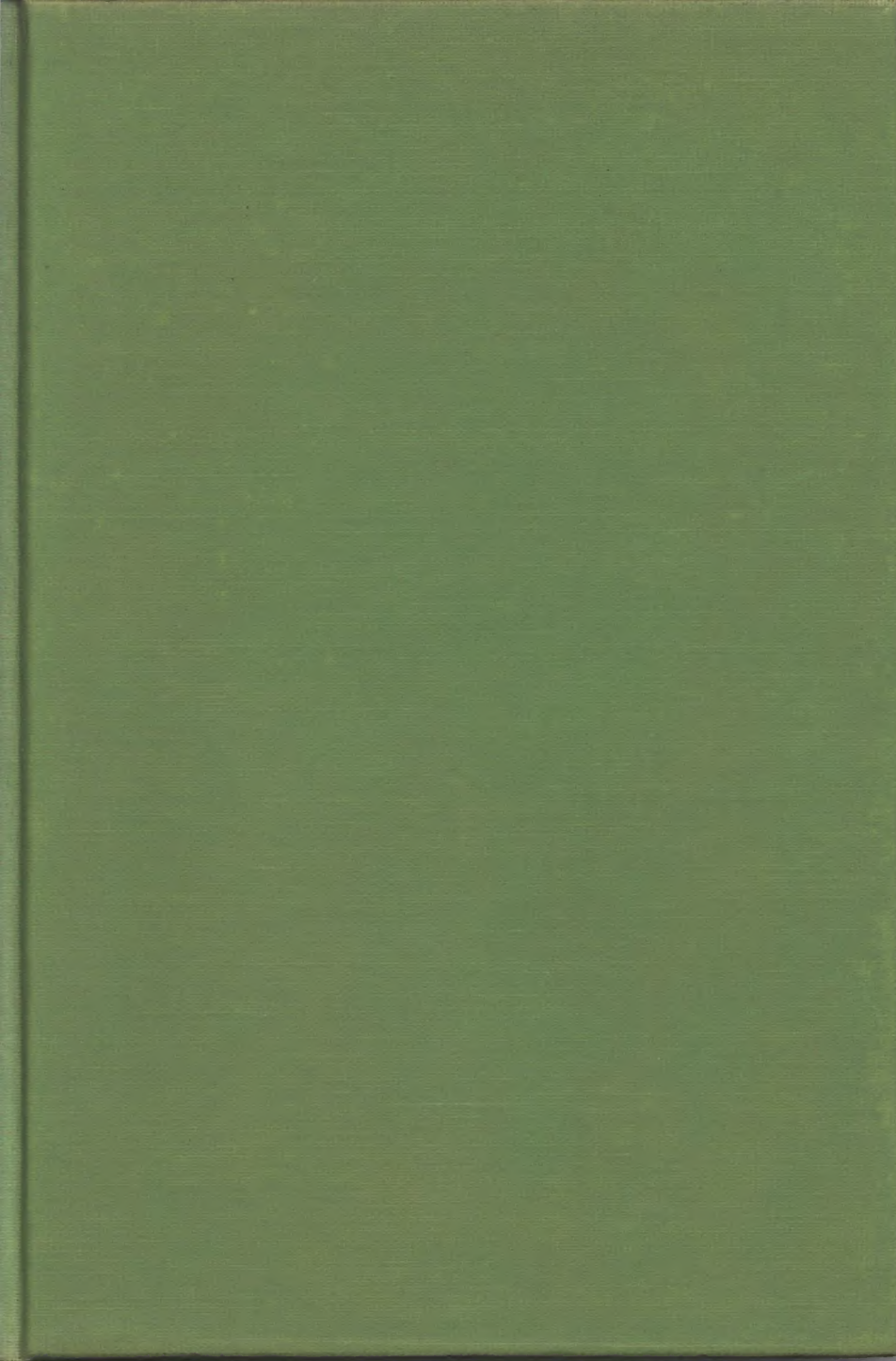
H. Bedford-Jones and W. C. Robertson combined more than fifty years ago to produce this strange Oriental tale. Bedford-Jones went on to become one of America's most prolific authors, the ideal collaborator for Dr. Robertson, who was a bonafide adventurer of the old school, a man who had encountered curious happenings in many lands.

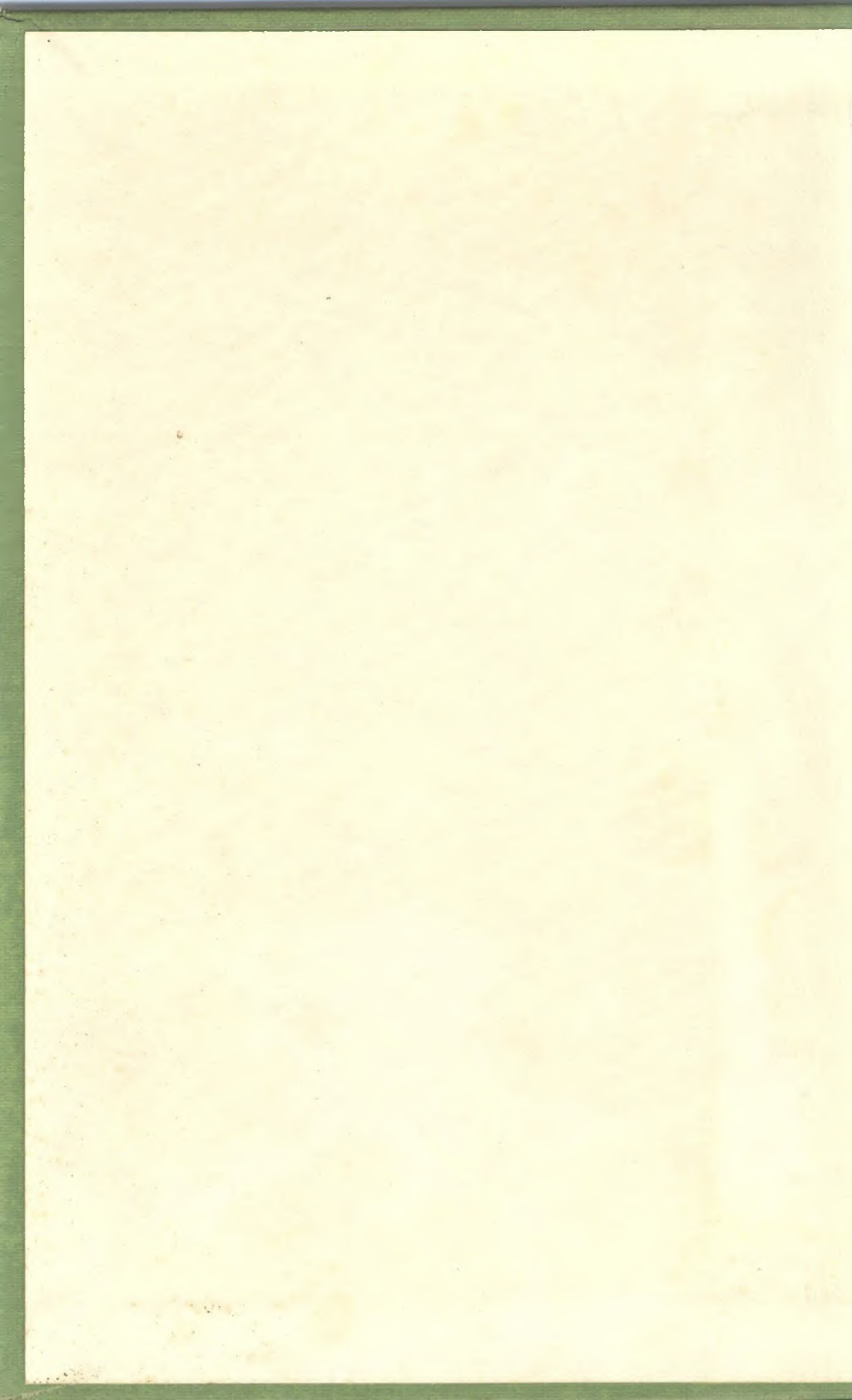
The dust wrapper and illustrations are the work of Canadian artist Richard Robertson.

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Illustrated by
Richard
Robertson

by

H. Bedford-Jones

&

W. C. Robertson

DONALD M. GRANT
PUBLISHER 1973

THE TEMPLE OF THE TEN

by H. Bedford-Jones and W.C. Robertson

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1973

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INTRODUCTION

No long-term fiction magazine in any genre excites me quite as much as the old *Adventure* magazine. It began in 1910, and went along a merry road—sometimes once a month, sometimes twice, and at one period managed three issues a month—until it fell before changing reading habits and high costs during the 1950's. In 1921, when "The Temple of the Ten" was published (first March, 1921 issue), *Adventure* was a highly successful magazine under the editorial genius of Arthur Sullivant Hoffman. Regular contributors included Talbot Mundy, Harold Lamb, Arthur O. Friel, Hugh Pendexter, and Arthur D. Howden-Smith. Rafael Sabatini and John Buchan, then at the height of their international popularity, were featured during the same year.

In his introduction for THE LAST CELT (the soon-to-be-published bibliography of Robert E.

Howard), E. Hoffmann Price points out that *Adventure* magazine represented the ultimate goal for fiction writers. The magazine stressed authenticity, and, not-so-strangely, that authenticity kept a lot of authors out of *Adventure*, particularly when it came to the unusual yarns the magazine liked to call "Off-the-Trail."

H. Bedford-Jones was a researcher, a listener, a most successful author "whose adventures have lain in other men's adventures." Henry James O'Brien Bedford-Jones was born in Napanee, Ontario in 1887. Under his own name and a flock of pseudonyms that included Allan Hawkwood, Gordon Keyne, and John Wycliff, he turned out hundreds of stories—often dividing his talents among as many as five manuscripts at one time. In an era of the small paycheck, Bedford-Jones' sheer prolificity earned him the astounding figure of more than a million dollars. For *Adventure* alone, he turned out seventy-five yarns over a twenty-five year period. But only four short novels in the space of one year were done in collaboration with W.C. Robertson.

"The Messenger" first December, 1920

"Other Men's Shoes" second February, 1921

"The Temple of the Ten" first March, 1921

"Three Men Seeking" first August, 1921

William C. Robertson was the perfect foil for Bedford-Jones. By 1920, he had been in Honduras for some years in a mining operation. In a letter to

Adventure, he describes himself as an “old Scotch medico (born in Glasgow) . . . who will try anything once, and in its pursuit have rubbed elbows with strange men and manners; have seen odd corners; have drawn the sword under weird banners; held high powers; and have known deep and foul dungeons.” Earlier, Dr. Robertson had been involved in Cuba against the Spanish—prior to the Spanish-American War, and it had been his strange adventuring out back-of-beyond in the Gobi that lent the authenticity to “The Temple of the Ten.”

And, most emphatically, Dr. Robertson insisted that “The Temple of the Ten” and the “City of Whirling Sands” existed; he had seen them with his own eyes.

That they could exist today is doubtful; that an adventurer of that vanished breed that was W. C. Robertson could find them in a world more than fifty years after the telling is more doubtful yet.

THE TEMPLE OF THE TEN

THE TEMPLE OF THE TEN

by H. Bedford-Jones and W.C. Robertson

CHAPTER I

THE PROFESSOR JOINS

Severn fired again. This time a crinkle of grim amusement drew down the wrinkles about his stark blue eyes. He had dropped one of the Mongolian guides who had led him into the trap. His sun-blackened face was leathery, harsh, very keen. He seemed to ignore the stench of the rotting camel whose body served him as a breastwork. On the hairy fore-shoulder were laid three cartridges—his last three.

This is an age of specialization, as folk are apt at saying without comprehending their own words. Severn was a specialist in Chinese ethnic and lingual affairs. His work on Irano-Sinica was a classic of research. His

monograph of six hundred pages on the admirable Chinese system of transcribing foreign words was a monument of philology. He had proved that the anthropomorphic conceptions in ancient Chinese religion were not really anthropomorphic at all.

His specialization led him to spend a year in Chinese Turkestan, working up gradually across the Shamo Desert toward Mongolia, and studying the dialects. This was now the tag-end of the year—a year of ethnic triumph, a year of personal disaster. His wife had died in his arms and lay buried in the Gobi. A collection of Indo-Scythian documents had been burned by lazy camel-men. Severn himself had been partially frozen during a storm on the Hu-shan gravel steppes. A drowned camel had carried down all his instruments and personal belongings excepting a rifle.

Through all this and much more Severn had come unembittered, gravely silent, with the same kindly, searching blue eyes and the same gentle deftness that made men love him. And now, at the year's end, he had come to life's end also.

Severn fired again, and his smile vanished. A miss; he did not like to miss. He had been ten hours without food or water, excepting such as he could get from the humps of the rotting Bactrian. Now he put his remaining cartridges into the magazine and waited. His last day on earth! A bullet snicked through the camel's fore-shoulder, spatted on a boulder and whanged off into space.

Behind Severn lay a frightful Odyssey, begun in the Chinese Turkestan deserts. Now he was somewhere at the edge of the Khangai plateau. At the back was the Gobi, or as the Chinese term it, the Shamo; ahead lay the Sajan range and Lake Baikal. Eastward lay Karakorum, the desolate ruins of the capital of Genghis Khan. Clad in Mongol skins, bearded and haggard, Severn was scarce recognizable as a white man.

He lay in a little hollow among ancient boulders, rising ground all around. It was not a good position, but he had not chosen it. About him rose the rim of the hollow, a circular horizon perhaps a quarter-mile in diameter. Half-way down from the rim, on all sides, were the Mongols into whose trap his treacherous guides had led him. They numbered a dozen.

A strange ending for a man learned in ancient lores and forgotten tongues, a scholar revered by Sinologues and ethnic students alike. Here he lay in a little gray rocky bowl, all his world shrunk down to this; the man of wisdom had become a primitive barbarian who sought only to slay before he himself was slain. Ignorant of the huge riches within his brain, they would murder him for the trifle of worldly pelf he had left, and would leave that brain to the birds. Sheer wasteful destruction—the young world's way.

From here and there about the indrawing circle of death muskets and rifles banged, bullets or slugs whirled above the central figure. Severn lay motionless, waiting until his final two cartridges might tell most effectually.

And as he waited he lifted bloodshot blue eyes to the rim of his little horizon.

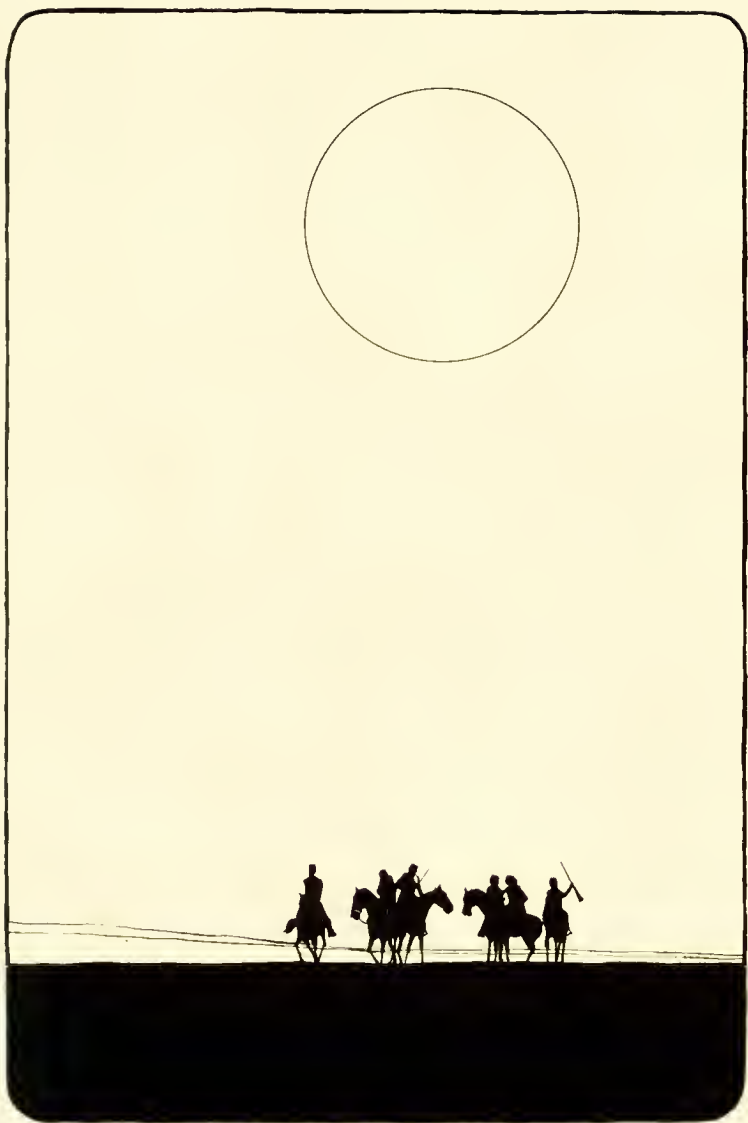
Now he saw what he deemed a mirage, a hallucination. For, limned there against the blazing sky, sharp and distinct in every detail, he saw a group of six men who stood and watched him. Five of them were bearded men in khaki, topped by rakish turbans; those turbans gave back a sun-glitter of steel, and Severn knew the steel for the turban-rings of Sikh troopers. Sikh troopers—here! The sixth man was a white man, also in khaki, and all six were calmly gazing down as if awaiting the end of this butchery.

A croaking laugh broke from Severn. The laugh died out in a gasp of startled surprise.

The white man had raised his hand in a gesture of command. At this gesture the Sikhs lifted their rifles and fired. Real men, real rifles! More than this, from other quarters came an answering crackle of rifle-fire. Severn turned his head and saw other parties of men at the rim of the sunken basin, firing downward.

A reechoing swirl of frantic yells broke up from the bouldered waste. Here and there leaped out Mongols, filthy, skin-clad figures. They scurried from here and yon, all trying to reach the cluster of tethered ponies. Some dropped. The rifle-fire from the rim of the bowl was an irregular but continuous crackle.

Severn rose to his feet, trembling a little. He lifted his rifle, forced his hands into steadiness and fired twice; the last brace of his treacherous guides fell to the



bullets. Then Severn took out his pipe, took out the pinch of tobacco wrapped in a squill of silk that he had preserved for two weeks, and filled his pipe.

He watched, sucking the unlighted pipe, for he had no light. Three of the Mongols reached the ponies; the others were dead. These three made a frantic effort to escape out of the bowl, but for them there was no escape. Bullets brought down their horses. Bullets killed them as they came to their feet again. That party was wiped out to the last man, mercilessly, efficiently, with a cold precision which startled Severn.

Who were these rescuers? Had he gone suddenly mad, or was this reality?

He sat down on the fore-shoulder of the camel. The three parties of men were coming down from the rim of this little world, but the closest was that which he had first seen. He stared at the white man who strode ahead of the Sikhs—a tall, ruggedly handsome type with the chopped-off angular jaw that bespoke south-of-England blood. Recognition dawned in the eyes of Severn; he had met this man somewhere in the past. Ah, yes! At the Naval Club in Weihaiwei a year or so ago; it seemed centuries. He remembered the chap now.

“Hullo, Kilgore!” he exclaimed as his rescuer came up. “You haven’t a match, have you?”

“Upon my word—it’s Severn!” Kilgore’s hand shot out. “Man, I didn’t recognize you! Where’s the rest of your crowd?”

Kilgore produced a match-box. Severn lighted his

pipe and answered curtly—

“Dead.”

“No, not these chaps.” Kilgore frowned slightly. “I mean the party you went up-country with; Mrs. Severn, the Jansen brothers and old Tom Fellows the botanist. No word has come through from any of you for months. I never dreamed you were up this way. At last reports your expedition was around Kashgar.”

Severn met the warm smile of Kilgore with impassive features. Then he kicked at the rotting camel twice.

“This,” he said reflectively, “is what’s left. And me.”

Kilgore started. The profound melancholy of those words affrighted him. He guessed that Severn was going to pieces inside, breaking up fast; it was a crucial moment. The wrong word, the wrong tone, and Severn would go mad, shoot himself, snap somewhere. Only such a man as Kilgore would have guessed this, for Severn appeared quite steady.

The Canadian—for such Kilgore really was—snapped out an order and his five Sikhs went on to join their advancing fellows. Then he produced a cigaret and lighted it. His words came fast, but not too fast, getting swift impact on Severn’s brain.

“Our scouts heard the firing this morning, and we came ahead. Surrounded the place, of course; if any of these chaps had gotten away, would have been bad for us. Confounded lucky thing we’ve met you, Severn. You’re the one man I know who might solve the enigma we’re up against—the Temple of the Ten Dromedaries.

We'll seize it, of course, but none of us are in your class, and we'd only waste the greatest opportunity an ethnologist could have. If you could come along with us, now—oh, hello! Here are my companions in crime.”

Severn looked up. Curiosity was already rising in his brain; he was steady now, in control again, and the critical instant was past. To join the two men came two others; Severn saw that there were a score of Sikhs engaged in rounding up the horses of the Mongol raiders, and all had been led by Kilgore and his two companions.

Severn was introduced to Day, a huge, cheerful American, and to Sir Fandi Singh, a Rajput gentleman, bearded and swart. An odd company, he thought. And before much speech had passed among them, Severn spoke his curiosity. Kilgore was handing about a canteen of lukewarm water as if he were quite unaware that Severn was perishing of thirst.

“How on earth did you fellows come to be here—with these Sikhs?”

There was a general smile, and Kilgore made off-hand response.

“Oh, we expect to reach the Temple of the Ten in a day or so. Let's get out of this devilish hot bowl and back to the horses. We can talk then in some peace.”

They walked back toward the rim by the way Kilgore had come, and in silence. Severn, safely over that tremendous shock of meeting white men in his present

circumstances, was already afire at thought of Kilgore's words and their implications. Why not? He had heard of the Temple of the Ten Dromedaries; every one in Mongolia had heard of it, a place fabulous as the palace of Kubla Khan. The tales about it would have done credit to the Arabian romancers; singing fishes, purple grass, magic and wonders innumerable! Severn, like other men of fact, had ignored the tales, taking them for fiction pure and simple.

Day produced chocolate and Severn seized it eagerly.

"Do you mean to say," he demanded between bites, "that this place does exist?"

Kilgore gave him a sidelong glance and smiled in satisfaction.

"We've been there—at least Fandi Singh and I have. We're going back. These chaps who tried to pot you were members of the temple tribe. Their own name for the place, by the way, is Darkan."

A singular light blazed up in the eyes of Severn.

"Darkan!" he murmured. "That is extraordinary!"

Kilgore smiled again, as if he had calculated the effect of this word.

The four men went on in silence. At the crest of the depression they sighted the horses, waiting at a little distance. Day placed a whistle at his lips and blew a shrill blast. The horse-guards brought forward the animals, while the Sikhs began the ascent from the basin.

Severn glanced around, his eyes sparkling.

"Where is your baggage train?" he demanded. "Your

camels and——”

“They come to meet us at Darkan,” said Kilgore. “They are in charge of Sheng Wu, a Chinese political agent and a most efficient man; he has an escort of fifty Manchu horsemen. Now, we’ll camp here until night; do you want to clean up first and sleep afterward?”

“By all means,” rejoined Severn.

The Sikhs assembled, and Severn sahib was introduced; they were delighted at having rescued him, grinned and jested like boys, proud of their work. The last four to arrive bore two Mongol bodies, which they laid down. Kilgore beckoned to Severn.

“Here’s a surprize for you! Did you ever see Mongols like these?”

Severn stood over the two bodies, astonished. They were totally unlike the usual men of the steppes, except in the common denominator of dirt. The complexions were clear, the death-fixed eyes were gray, almost without obliquity. The frontal measure was very wide.

“Broad, high brow—benevolent-looking ducks!” said Day. “But it’s all in looks. They are large men, eh? No bow-legged little Tatars!”

“I think their language is a compound of Russian and Mongol,” added Kilgore. “Can you make anything of their race, Severn?”

The latter nodded thoughtfully.

“It’s quite clear,” he observed. “The type has turned up before—descendants of the Russian sect of Starovertsi, or ‘old believers,’ who came here from

Russia in the eighteenth century and were swallowed up by the Mongol Kirgiz hordes. Quite clear.”

Day stared hard at him for a moment, then clapped him lustily on the shoulder.

“You win, professor! I take off my hat to you. Come along, now—Fandi has raided our haversacks for a shirt and pants, and we’ll spare you enough water for a shave—”

In effect, camp had been made while they examined the two bodies. It was a simple camp; no fires, since “they hadn’t *de quoi*,” little water, no shelter. It was the camp of men who are staking everything on one swift, sure stroke.

Severn was aided to bathe and shave, none grudging him the precious water. Enough odd garments were found to clothe him. When the job was finished, he was staggering with mental and physical weariness and reaction—but he looked and felt like a new man.

“You’d better eat no more until after you’ve slept, old man,” said Kilgore. “Here you are; curl up in this hollow and I’ll fling a coat over you. I presume you’ll throw in with us, what?”

Severn lifted his face to the clean sky, and uttered his first sane laugh in months.

“With all my heart!”

CHAPTER II

SEVERN UNDERSTANDS

In this *sai*, this driven waste of glacial gravel, there was no timber. The three friends sat about a burner of solidified alcohol, brewing tea; Severn slept near by; the Sikhs were making their evening meal from emergency rations.

"That chap," and Day nodded his head toward the sleeping Severn, "is a fine man, Kilgore. Wonderful! If I'd been in his place—well, I'd have gone off my head long ago."

"He's lost everything in life," said Kilgore thoughtfully. "If he pulls out sane, and has something given him to live for, he'll still be a great man in the world. We'll give him the something—additions to his science."

Fandi Singh frowned slightly and fingered his curly

beard.

"What was that you told him about Darkan?" he questioned. "Why did it affect him, and what mystery is there in it?"

Kilgore smiled.

"He'll tell you himself—he's stirring now. It's a philological puzzle, that's all. Exactly the thing he needed to buck him up."

Severn came to his feet and joined them. Sleep had made a new man of him. He stood gazing at the three, a shadowy, gentle smile on his lips.

"I don't believe I've thanked you fellows," he observed. "I am grateful, you know——"

"Oh, sit down and forget everything," said Day in his roughly genial way. "Say, Fandi Singh wants to know about that Darkan stuff! What is there about it so blamed queer? I don't see anything curious in a Mongolian name."

Severn chuckled, sat down, took the cigaret Kilgore handed him, and inhaled the smoke with avid delight.

"It's an Old-Turkish word, not Mongol," he said. "Perhaps it was derived from Uigur. It's been carried all over Asia and Europe—Astrakan, or Hajji Tarkan, is a sample. You chaps staggered me with the news that this temple really exists, and that word may give a clue to its origin. For years there has been a philologic battle over it. It means, in effect, 'endowed with authority.' "

"Any connection with the Chinese word ta-kan?" queried Kilgore.

"The same word. The ancient Chinese pronunciation was dar-kan. It's often written with an x, like the name of the last Ming general, Koxinga; but the letter is always intended for the spirant surd. Some cheerful fool put out that ta-kan stood for Great Khan, yet the old pronunciation, as well as the transcription, shows its real meaning."

Kilgore winked slyly at Sir Fandi. It was evident that Severn was himself again.

"The water's hot," he announced. "Tea, Day! Can't give you much to eat, Severn; we're on emergency rations. Make the best of things as they are. By the way, what do you know about the Darkan temple?"

"Rumor only. Nothing definite."

"We'll sketch things for you, and then be on our way, eh?"

"Good. Call these emergency rations, do you? If you'd been eating what I have for the past few months, you'd say this was a Lucullan feast! Now I know how that old Roman ambassador from Antonius Pius must have felt, when he had wandered over Tibet and Tartary and finally came to the outposts of Chinese civilization. Let's have your tale."

While eating, Severn listened to the facts related by Kilgore.

First, Darkan existed; both Kilgore and Fandi Singh had been there. They were now returning—partly with governmental authority, partly for loot, and partly for

humanitarian reasons. Twenty-odd Sikhs had been recruited from discharged Indian army men. Also, Kilgore had with him a machine gun of his own invention.

"Poor Mac was half-inventor, also," he said, "but we left Mac in Kalgan—bad case of septic poisoning from an infected razor. He's safe enough, but in no shape for hard work. And I can tell you we've had hard work getting here! Now for the Darkan material.

"The temple has ten priests, who in turn have ten novitiates. They absolutely rule the tribe who supports 'em, but they're located at some distance from the tribe. The Mongols have a tremendous respect for the temple and won't come near it except on order, and once a year for worship. The novitiates are what might be called outside priests. Ten times a year they send in ten girls to the temple; a nasty business all around, Severn."

Severn nodded.

"I can imagine so. A brutal crowd, heritors of some ancient glory."

"Quite so. But behind the temple and the priests is some unknown person who rules the lot. They call him Esrin. He is highly mysterious, lives apart from the temple at the sacred lake, issues all orders by telepathy, and so forth. Telepathy plays a large part in the whole affair. When the priests need money, they send a telepathic message to this Esrin, who returns orders when and where to go. They go, and find money and jewels waiting for them. Mysterious, what?"

"I don't believe half of that, in spite of you all," said Day cheerfully. "It's a fairy-tale! But I know the priests exist. Money and jewels—bosh! Jewels, particularly Central Asian jewels, aren't worth half what romancers claim. I know!"

Severn's blue eyes were sparkling.

"I suppose you know about this Esrûn?" he asked.

Kilgore shook his head.

"No. What do you mean?"

"Esrûn is the Mongol designation of Brahma, derived from Uigur Zarua, in turn taken from the Sogdian form 'zrwa, the equivalent of the Avestan 'zrvan. Remarkable!"

Fandi Singh chuckled in his beard.

"You are thinking fifteen centuries away; we are thinking in the present," he said calmly. "These priests of Darkan are degenerate brutes, and very dangerous. If we surprize the temple, we can hold it against all assaults until Sheng Wu comes up with our baggage, camels and assistance. Then we mean to locate this Esrûn and clean him out. I think," he added reflectively, "that he is some old Mongol shaman who has found the tomb of Genghis Khan—perhaps the hereditary guardian of the tomb. Who knows? There are some who say that Genghis Khan was no other than Yoshitsune, prince of the Gengi, a Japanese general——"

Day came to his feet.

"With all due respect," he said dryly, "we can sit here and drivel all night about myths and legends. Me, I'm

for action! It's getting dark, two of our scouts are already in and waiting to report, and we'd better can the talk. I don't care who these fellows with Bible names are descended from, so long as I get the drop on 'em. Let's go."

There was a general laugh and immediate assent. Day thrilled on his whistle, and two stalwart Sikhs came up and saluted.

Severn took the reins of the little Mongol horse brought to him and watched in the semi-darkness as Kilgore received reports and issued orders. He had long ago decided that he liked these three marvelous men—the American, the Canadian, the Rajput. They were straight, clean men doing big things. And why? What gods did they serve? He could not be sure about this. He judged for himself that they had little reverence for money; this expedition must have cost more than could be recouped financially.

Not science had drawn them into this dreary section of earth, these weary leagues of stone and sand where indigenous man was lower than most animals. They were not scientists in any sense. The hint came to him with memory of Kilgore's tone in speaking of the periodical convoys of virgins sent to Darkan by the novitiate priests.

Severn, because he was essentially the same type of man himself, saw suddenly with the eyes of Kilgore—and comprehended. There was more to this Temple of the Ten Dromedaries than he knew, more

than the rumored tales could furnish. It was a survival of some ancient culture, now an infected plague-sore that poisoned everything around. It was a thing from which the clean mind of a civilized man recoiled, as from some loathsome insect.

To this intuitive feeling Severn reacted instinctively. For a year he had been engaged in a constant struggle against disaster, a constantly failing effort to escape from the overwhelming tide of a remorseless fate. His friends and companions had gone down. His wife had gone down. His painfully gathered scientific materials had gone down. Reduced to the bone and sinew of his own body, everything else destroyed, he found himself suddenly plucked up and thrown into the company of men who had fought through a wilderness outpost of hell—for what? For nothing selfish.

Severn caught his breath. Now he perceived why those Mongols had been exterminated, pitilessly—as one crushes out the loathsome insect in fear and horror. Darkan must be worse even than rumor pictured the place.

Day saluted at an order from Kilgore, blew three sharp blasts on his whistle and turned to Severn.

“We’re off, professor! You’d better ride with me. Bad going before morning—we’ll strike the sands again.”

Sir Fandi Singh, in the saddle of a beautiful white stallion, turned and shouted a cheery farewell and trotted away. After him went fifteen of the Sikh troopers, leaving a bare dozen to follow Kilgore. Severn,

already in the saddle, reined in beside Day.

"Where are they off to? We don't seem to be following them——"

Day chuckled.

"Blamed good thing we're not! Anybody following Fandi Singh this night has some job ahead! We've timed our arrival, you see, to coincide with that of the caravan from Urga—the caravan which the novitiate priests bring in every thirty-six days. We're striking Darkan from the south; the caravan comes in from the northeast. So Fandi is going ahead to catch that caravan as it enters the temple valley. He has fifteen men to do the work of fifty, and to ride like —— doing it. If any of the Mongols get away on the back trail, they'll raise the tribe. If any of 'em get through, they'll warn the temple priests. Yes, sir, if you want to know what real work is like, you stick with Fandi Singh!"

Severn was silent for a space. Kilgore drew in at his left; the dozen Sikhs came after them, all unhurried, progressing steadily and surely. Presently Severn spoke.

"You have done this with your imagination at work."

Kilgore understood, and assented.

"We've had to look ahead, yes. The priests have a general slaughter of the women every month—clearing the way for the newcomers. As I said, it's a nasty affair, Severn; won't do to dwell on. If we can strike that temple tomorrow night, we'll find only the priests there. Fandi Singh has to halt the Urga caravan and rescue the girls it is bringing."

"Suppose you've miscalculated dates?" asked Severn.

"We haven't miscalculated." The answer was swift, curt, decisive.

"By gad, I like you chaps!" exclaimed the scientist impulsively. "If you've been here before and learned the ropes, good enough; we may get away with it! A lot I care what the end is—you're good company to stick with! But is there any truth in the stories of telepathic control?"

"More than you'd believe," said Day dourly. "More than I believed—at first."

"Then," said Severn, "don't you imagine that the priests will be already forewarned? Give the mystics due credit; they know a lot we don't. Isn't it more than probable that they have received telepathic warnings of your projected expedition?"

Then Kilgore did a singular thing. He made no answer for a moment, but presently lifted his arm and pointed to the blazing stars in the night-sky above them. When he spoke, his voice held a hushed but profound emotion—an emotion strange in so poised a man.

"Can you realize what those twinkling dots are—and not believe in God?" he said softly.

Severn made no response. Perhaps those words went deeply into him.

CHAPTER III

THE CITY OF THE WHIRLING SANDS

Severn lay flat at the mouth of the defile and watched an extraordinary scene from beneath the curving rim of a great boulder.

Before dawn they had arrived at the valley of Darkan. This valley had two entrances, and this southern entrance was guarded by a single Mongol. As Kilgore had explained, the office of guardian was hereditary. Except for this one man, those of the tribe never ventured into the valley of the whirling sands.

Severn stared as a lone Sikh advanced, unarmed and openly, in the new light of day. The Sikh held his turban-ring over one wrist. Ahead of him appeared nothing but rock.

"A play for primitive curiosity," said Kilgore, low-voiced, from his position beside Severn. "If it

wins—we win. Few men have seen a Sikh turban-ring at work. Watch.”

The Sikh came to a pause, stared around vacantly. Among the rocks ahead a single skin-clad figure stood up; the dull glint of a rifle-barrel was visible. The Sikh seemed not to observe it, but stooped and fumbled at the laces of a shoe.

The Mongol stepped forward, rifle held loosely. The Sikh picked up a stone and threw it at some invisible snake or scorpion near by. The Mongol jumped, saw that his fear was groundless, came forward again.

Then for the second time the Sikh stooped to throw. The motion appeared awkward and ungainly. The steel ring left his hand, whirled out in a wide arc, and the Mongol stared at in astonishment. The ring curved through the air, as a flat stone curves from the hand of a boy; it shot upward—and suddenly gave one terrible swoop downward. A cry burst from the Mongol. The razor-edge of that steel ring struck him between neck and body. He vanished from sight.

Day's whistle shrilled. The Sikhs leaped up, ran for the defile. Severn found himself running with them. They came to the lone Sikh rising from above the body of the Mongol, wiping his ring. He saluted Kilgore and smiled.

“Sahib, he was alone.”

Day picked up a long tube of bronze which the Mongol had dropped. It was some sort of horn or trumpet. That its note could cover the ten miles of

valley to the Darkan temple was an incredible conjecture; yet here was the man, here was the trumpet—naught beside.

"I guess," said Day, "we won't try the thing, eh? Come on."

The horses were brought up, and the fifteen men rode through the defile. This, presently, widened before them, broadened out into a great valley of sand—a yellow waste in the morning sunlight, with yellow mountains to the left, purple-shadowed hills to the right. They halted to make camp beside a pool of clear, cold water in a hollow of the defile.

"Three hours for sleep," said Kilgore calmly. "Then on."

No fires were made. The Sikhs squatted, ate, talked in low eager tones. Severn and Day, who was also seeing this place for the first time, sat and listened to Kilgore, who had an excellent idea of how the land lay.

"Imagine a great Y," said the Canadian, "at the bottom of which we now stand. This lower portion is ten miles in length. Once it was a fertile valley, like those buried cities of Khotan which you have seen, Severn. Under that sand ahead of us lies a city——"

"This is the valley of whirling sands, that the legends tell about?"

"Exactly. At the upper end stands the Darkan temple, the last remnant of that lost city. The right fork of the Y is short, only a few miles in length, and ends in a blank valley—what would be called a box canyon in

the States. That is where the magic lake of singing fishes and purple grass lies, the home of Esrun himself.

"The left fork of the Y, to the left of those central hills ahead, is a defile like this one, but it opens into a series of valleys which support the Darkan tribe. Fandi Singh is now at that defile, I trust, waiting to cut off the caravan. He is to join us at the temple two hours after dark. There will be only the ten priests to fear. They have a number of Mongol women who attend to the housekeeping. We'll handle them easily."

Severn gave his companions a reflective glance.

"The whole procedure sounds like a very simple thing, after all."

Kilgore smiled.

"It would be simple to capture—if one had a plan of the place! Let's get some sleep. Guards out, Day?"

The latter nodded.

"No forage for the horses, though. They're in bad shape."

"There's forage to be had in plenty—at the temple."

Day grinned and settled himself for sleep in the hollows he had dug for hips and shoulder-blades. Severn followed suit and was asleep almost instantly.

When he wakened, it was to hear a low murmur of wonder from the bearded Sikhs, who were one and all staring at the sand-valley before them. Severn sat up and looked at the valley; he remained thus, propped up on his hands, staring blankly.

There was something—a score of things—moving

there, far down the valley. At first glance they looked like water-spouts, some of huge size, some very small. They were, of course, whirlwinds of sand; but the odd thing was that they retained their shape and moved in almost regular lines back and forth.

Smiling, Kilgore thrust a pair of field-glasses into the hand of Severn. The latter looked again. Miles away in that clear atmosphere, he saw strange things. Those whirling sands were, in the central portion of the valley, marching in incredible numbers. As they came and went, Severn saw a black mass disclosed for a moment—the ruin of some uncovered house or palace. It vanished again. He saw great toghrak-trees laid bare, and then disappear. He saw buildings come into shape; one looked like the *tope* of some low-built temple.

A stalwart Sikh came up and saluted Kilgore.

“Sahib, this is the place of whirling sands, of which you told us? Good. Do these sands swallow up men?”

“Like flies,” said Kilgore grimly. “We march by the eastern rim of the valley, risaldar. If we have luck we shall get through.”

“Wah, Guru!” exclaimed the Sikh. “Then we wet our turbans here.”

He gave an order. The Sikhs sprang into activity, tearing from their long turbans strips of cloth for the noses of men and animals—the leather head-bags had been left with the camels. The wet cloths would substitute. Kilgore turned to Severn.

“You see why no Mongols venture into this valley,

except at such times as the priests indicate?"

Severn nodded.

"Wind-currents, atmospheric conditions, heat and altitude," he said curtly. "When do we march?"

"Now," answered Day, and shrilled on his whistle.

The fifteen set out. There was but one lead-pony, which bore Kilgore's machine gun. Following the Canadian, they headed diagonally for the eastern edge of the valley, where comparatively few of the sand-spouts were dancing.

It was wearisome going, for the sands were loose and shifting, so that the animals sank fetlock-deep at each step; Severn perceived that they would be most of the day in traversing this ten-mile valley. He had had his fill of this monotonous sand-marching long since. The menace of the whirling pillars of sand did not worry him, nor the gusty winds that filled the air with flying particles. He was inured to all this and as he rode on his thoughts wandered to Kilgore's separation of forces.

That Kilgore had left his camels and baggage to follow under guard of Sheng Wu and the Manchu riders, less from choice than from necessity, was plain enough. Yet Severn did not like it. Such men as the Darkan priests, who kept in full touch with the outside world by means of their novitiates, might easily have heard of the projected expedition; all magic aside, they might have learned of it through natural sources of information. A conviction oppressed Severn's mind that Kilgore had committed a fatal error—but it was not his

to speak of it now.

Time dragged. The party made slow progress along the eastern edge of the valley and presently even Severn was eying the sand-spouts uneasily. Large and small, those whirling vortices moved with an incredible speed. Noses of men and animals were muffled in the wet cloths. When one of the smallest pillars shot toward them, a tiny vortex no higher than a mounted man, the riders eyed it grimly and awaited its coming without fear.

It burst upon them. Severn, no less than the others, was profoundly startled by the frightful force of this tiny sand-spout. It was a perfect maelstrom of wind and sand that whirled on them, buffeted and wrenched them, nearly tore them from their saddles. The sand cut through clothes and hairy pelts to the skin. When they emerged from it, they were gasping, staggered, stricken. The captured Mongol ponies broke away and fled, screaming shrilly.

"My —!" croaked Day in dismay. "If one of those big fellows lands on us, good night! That was sample enough for me—"

Kilgore held up his hand and gave a sharp command.

"Forward! At the whistle from Day sahib, break ranks and seek shelter along the rock-ledges. Forward."

They rode on, men and beasts sorely shaken by realization of the danger. To their right stretched abrupt ledges of the red Khangai granite. Kilgore explained to Severn that, although there were no sand-spouts in the

valley at night, precisely for that reason had he chosen to attack by day. The priests would be caught completely off guard at dark.

"You have planned boldly," said Severn. The eyes of Kilgore bored into him.

"But not well?"

Severn parried with his gentle smile.

"My dear chap, I certainly am no competent critic. No two generals adopt the same tactics. Let us await the event—"

Day's whistle shrilled; a great whirling pillar had swerved and was sweeping straight toward them as if guided by some infernal intelligence. The horses snorted, broke in panic. Severn, like the others, dismounted and gripped his bridle, clinging close in against the rocky wall that would break the blow.

But not all gained that wall. Two of the horses got the bits between their teeth and with their riders bolted straight ahead, frantic with terror. As if they were standing still, Severn saw the whirling pillar rush for them—then the maelstrom was shattered along the precipice; he found himself engulfed by a dun cloud of stifling sand and gripped hard at the nostrils of his trembling horse. The two fleeing men vanished. Sand covered everything.

It was over presently. Buried to the waist, the men emerged. The pack-horse with the gun was safe. All sign of those two men was gone; blotted out as if they had never been, even the place where they had gone down

could not be discerned. The sand-waves, in level wind-riffled billows, had covered them over and were smooth again. To search for the lost men were folly; delay in this place were madness.

"Mount," ordered Day, and the staring men obeyed.

"By the right hand of the Lion," spoke out the stalwart risaldar, stroking sand from his beard, "I think there are devils in this place!"

"So there are, risaldar," said Kilgore coolly. "Are we to fear devils, then?"

The risaldar laughed fiercely, and after him the other nine. They spurred forward again; and as they passed through that vast city, buried under the sands of forgotten centuries, they beheld strange things laid bare by the floating sands. Yet they paused not.

Severn, as he rode, wondered what would happen to them if Sheng Wu and the supporting force did not show up.

CHAPTER IV

THE HUNTING OF THE RATS

Two miles from the junction of the Y-arms at the upper end of the valley of whirling sands the party halted at mid-afternoon. Here, sheltered by a long rock-ledge jutting into the valley, was their last cover. Between them and the temple lay open sand, which Kilgore dared not cross until darkness came to shield them from sight.

With his two companions Severn stretched out on the rocky ledge and trained the glasses upon the Darkan temple. Off to the left diverged the left arm of the Y, a narrowing continuation of the sandy valley. The right arm was hidden from their sight. In between lay a craggy wall of red granite running into the high hills behind. A long green niche in this wall showed the position of the temple.

"It's a grassy spot watered by springs," explained Kilgore. "They keep racing dromedaries and a few horses and sheep there—you'll pick up the wall in a minute. Found it, have you? It's walled, of course. Look to the right end of the green spot for the temple—a low *tope*. The valley has been filled with sand since it was built, so that the dome is now almost below the level of the sands. Those rocky knuckles out in front have kept the sand from encroaching. In ancient times the temple had a view of the whole valley; now they can barely see this two-mile strip of sand—unless they have watchers posted on the hillside behind. They're too lazy for that, I fancy. They trust to the Mongolian watchman at the southern end, the chap we attended to at dawn."

Severn had picked up the temple, a mass of granite melting into the hill behind. It appeared deserted; but moving specks in the walled pasture indicated habitation.

In the scene was nothing startling. Everything was prosaic, drab, stark mountains and yellow sand, and this abode of man was repellent in its primitive ugliness. Only when one turned to view the marching pillars of whirling sand did the impression come of strangely sinister forces at work. Only when one looked to the far green peaks of the higher Khangais was this impression strengthened by the memory that somewhere hereabouts had been the throne of Prester John, whence the Mongol blast had gone forth to burn half the world. According to Marco Polo, Ghenghis Khan had been a

minor chief and later son-in-law of Prester John.

The three returned, joined the Sikhs again, and at sunset the evening meal was made ready; it was a good meal, finishing up the last of the rations. The horses, on their last legs for lack of fodder, were given the last of the water.

"It's a case of root hog or die!" exclaimed Day cheerfully. "Everything we lack is over yonder behind a wall—and we have to get it. So we'll probably get it."

"Exactly." Kilgore produced a cherished English cigaret and lighted it. "Luxuries tomorrow—if we win! Those chaps bring in all sorts of stuff from the outside world. Two to one we find a phonograph in the main temple hall! If they were not a lazy outfit, and if they had put their brains to work, they could have made this place the center of a Mongol horde which might sweep Asia! Tell you what, this place has an influence that's felt as far south as Tibet; but these brutes lacked initiative. The mysterious Esrin—"

Kilgore checked himself and fell into silence. Now, as on one or two previous occasions, Severn was conscious of things left unsaid—hints at unguessed influence behind this expedition. The British ruled in Tibet. These Sikhs were ex-Indian army men. Kilgore's invention of the machine gun had been given to China. Was this one of the numberless outflung protecting arms of the British Empire—not in any sense official, yet none the less with far-reaching political effect—which had been carried into distant places by adventurous men since the

days of the East India Company? Severn could find no answer, except in his own imagination. The speculation was interesting, but unsatisfying.

"You're going to wait for some word from Fandi Singh?" he asked.

"No." Kilgore shook his head. The man was perfectly poised as always, yet he was inwardly aflame with a nervous excitement. "We have enough men here to win or lose—and if we fail to surprize the ten priests, we lose. If we win, Fandi joins us and we can hold the temple indefinitely against the tribe—until Sheng Wu arrives."

Once again Severn felt that singular uneasiness over the way in which Kilgore's ultimate plans depended on the arrival of Sheng Wu. But he thrust the thought from his mind.

The sun slipped away and was gone. In the valley the whirling sands had died down and the wind ceased. Rifles were cleaned and loaded. The machine gun was not unpacked, as its chief value was for defense. When the long twilight was merging into night Kilgore gave the word to mount.

To Severn this final two miles presented a choking tedium, for eagerness was dragging at his soul. No word was spoken; the orders had been given and understood beforehand. Presently the horses sniffed the green oasis ahead and their pace quickened. Mounting a sharp rise in the sand, a light appeared ahead—rather, a glow of soft radiance marking the low rounded dome of the

temple.

"Luminous paint in the *tope*," whispered Kilgore. "A lot of tricks like this inside. Come ahead!"

He and Severn quickened their advance, followed by the risaldar. Day halted the others and deployed some of them—for all egress from the place was to be shut off.

The mass of the temple was now clearly visible in the dim starlight; Severn perceived that it was a long, low building of stone, seeming of massive strength. There was no indication of any watch being kept. Indeed, the central gates stood open and unguarded.

"Got 'em!" murmured Kilgore, and dismounted. "This is the hour when they meet to communicate with Esrûn. If we're lucky we'll see things."

Handing their reins to the risaldar, Kilgore and Severn advanced on foot. They were in the gateway, and through. Pistol in hand, Kilgore led the way as if he had a perfect familiarity with the temple. Starbeams lighted their advance.

Inside the gates, a courtyard, small and backed by the temple proper. Somewhere afar a Mongol woman's voice rose in shrill, reedy song, followed by a banging of copper pots. This prosaic note drew a smile from Severn; then he followed Kilgore into darkness. A stone passage walled them in.

Kilgore had provided himself with a tiny pocket flashlight, probably for this very need. He flashed the pencil-beam ahead and Severn discerned only stone walls. An occasional door showed itself; then came a

flight of descending steps. The Canadian halted.

"We've passed the entrance to the main hall," he breathed. "Nobody there now. Steps wind down, come out directly on council chamber. Not a sound, now!"

In darkness again, Severn followed down the stone steps. His nostrils caught the indescribable reek of temple candles, loose cotton wicks burning but un consumed. The stairs went on interminably—twenty-five, thirty of them. Then a soft glow of light, and a curtain of some frayed material through which came the light.

To Severn this unhindered access was incredible. Now came the explanation, as Kilgore halted him with a touch—a high, shrill voice, vibrant with excitement, that rose from behind the curtain and spoke a Mongol readily understood by Severn.

"We have obeyed the orders of our lord Esrin. It is three weeks and more since the men of Darkan went forth, led by five novices, to the destruction of the impious white men and their followers. Let us ask our lord if the novices have made report to him."

Severn's eyes widened. Kilgore was glancing at him interrogatively; evidently the Canadian knew little of this language. But Severn dared say nothing. He held up a hand for silence and leaned forward, tensed, awaiting what might come next.

No further sound—blank silence from behind the curtain. Kilgore moved forward and Severn cautiously joined him. They stood at the curtain and looked

through the frayed holes therein. And now, for a moment, Severn could not believe the scene before him. He even forgot that frightful news which had just come to his ears.

He gazed upon a company of ten men seated about a table, and on the table were four huge temple candles of soft, painted wax, smoking unheeded. The table was of ancient stone, but neither table nor candles held the stupefied gaze of Severn; it was the men themselves, the ten priests of Darkan, who sat in ungainly temple chairs of cracked lacquer and hugely curving mastodons' tusks, fossil ivory from the northern glaciers.

Each of those barbaric chairs framed a picture of brutish splendor. Red lamas were these men; their robes and hats were of dusky red, highly embroidered and flittering with an abundance of rich jewels—not the usual Tibetan ornaments of coral and turquoise, but blazing stones, cut and polished, set in antique fashion and throwing back the yellow candle-light in a flashing stream of fire. The men themselves were obese, bestial figures of lust and license unchecked. They sat in silence, staring at the candles. Their hair and mustaches and straggly beards were heavily gilded; their finger-nails were long and encased in quills of gold after the old Chinese fashion.

Now Severn saw the brutal faces crossed by a wave of startled emotion, as if into each man's brain had come some perturbing thought—yet no word had been spoken. After an instant one of them spoke, uneasily, as

if to affirm the message he had caught.

“Our lord tells me that the men of Darkan have destroyed that caravan, and that our novices report there was no trace of white men. Is this correct, brethren?”

The others assented. Their breathing was heavy, rapid, tense. Severn, who saw that Kilgore understood nothing of what was said, went sick at heart.

The scheme of this infernal Esrin was plain to him now. Esrin had sent out the tribe under five novices, directing them by telepathy to destroy Kilgore's caravan, yet not knowing that Kilgore had left that caravan. The other five novices, no doubt, were bringing the virgin tribute from Urga. And Sheng Wu had been destroyed!

In his agitation, Severn touched the curtain before him. It waved. From one of the Ten broke a cry—and the cry was lost in the crack of Kilgore's pistol.

What came afterward was a mad frenzy of destruction. The priests were armed—and were armed with automatic pistols. They dashed down the candles and scattered. The chamber had other doors. Kilgore's little flashlight was of small avail.

Severn yielded to the lust of the manhunt—running after fleeing figures, shooting, pursuing blindly with sobbing breath and emptied pistol. Dark passages, shots stabbing the obscurity, the stifling stink of smoldering candle-wicks, the tumultuous shouts and screams of fighting men—everything was pandemonium, sheer

madness! Of what he did or where he went Severn could afterward remember little.

He emerged into the open night, staggering, gasping for breath, and found himself standing in the temple courtyard. The stone building behind was reverberating to shots, shouts, poundings. There welled up the same wild Sikh battle-yell that sounded when the foundations of Mogul mosques were washed in the blood of swine by the hillmen.

“Wah, Guru!”

With swish of torn silk, a figure leaped out past Severn, darted across the open sand. Behind it, in the darkness of some doorway, clanged the echoing breath of a rifle; the figure spun about, tottered, went down.

“Wah, Guru!”

The risaldar came forth, joined Severn and laughed wildly. “Ha, sahib! There was the last of the rats—we have hunted them down well, eh? By the brood of the Lion, this was good work! The women are under guard, unhurt; they were all old cattle, those women. And only two of our men wounded!”

Severn felt suddenly sickened with himself.

“Do not rejoice too soon,” he returned harshly. “Sheng Wu and the caravan have been destroyed.”

The risaldar uttered one astonished ejaculation, then fell silent.

CHAPTER V

“UNG-KHAN, THAT IS TO SAY, PRESTER JOHN.”

—M. Polo

Twenty minutes after the last shot was fired, Sir Fandi Singh and five men came riding in at top speed, to find the temple already taken.

The ten priests had fallen to the last man; stripped of their jeweled insignia, they were consigned to a burial party at once, and a swift search of the temple was made. The half-dozen Mongolian hags who did the work of the place were confined closely in one of the rear chambers, for they could not be trusted. Except for these the temple was empty.

Traces of other inhabitants were found—gorgeous clothes and jewels of women, for example; one of the hags confessed that these women had been taken to the lake of singing fish the previous night. What this meant

was clear enough. Many rifles of Russian and German make were found, with ammunition; and the store-room was filled with luxurious supplies of all descriptions. The main hall of the temple, the place of worship of the tribe, was gaudy with Buddhistic images, many of them the fine jeweled brasswork of Tibet.

"Where's Severn?" asked Kilgore suddenly, missing the scientist.

"Down below," said Day. "Said he wanted to see the dromedaries. There's nothing else to see in that place."

"Very well—post sentries and join us there, immediately."

With Fandi Singh, Kilgore went to the lower chamber in which they had surprized the ten priests. Both men were calm enough. They had no doubt that what Severn had told them was correct—that the caravan had been destroyed by the Darkan tribe. They knew that the telepathic powers of the priests were remarkable, and it was true that only five novices had been with the caravan ambushed by Sir Fandi.

They found Severn standing over that singular stone table about which the ten priests had been assembled. He had lighted more candles, and the chamber was dimly illuminated. It seemed some ancient place of worship abandoned in favor of the upper hall, Chinese fashion; except for the table and chairs it contained only ten pillars spaced at intervals. But these pillars were remarkable.

The lower portions of these pillars were shaped in the

form of dromedaries or camels, nearly full size; from the humps ascended stone columns to support the roof. Each pillar had obviously been carved from the living rock, as had the chamber itself.

Severn glanced up excitedly as the two men entered, and raised his hand.

"Look! I want you to notice something—this table! It's been hewn out of the bare stone, you see? And note its position, here at one end of the place. Does that suggest anything to you?"

Kilgore and Sir Fandi shook their heads.

"Not a thing," said the Canadian.

He produced half a dozen packets of English cigarets, procured from the store-room, and tossed them wearily on the table. Severn brushed them aside with a gesture of swift irritation.

"But look again—can't you see that this room is like a church? That this table stands in place of the altar—what was anciently a table indeed? And now look at the under side of it—"

Severn lighted one of the candles, whose soft, pigmented wax stained his fingers a vivid scarlet. Unheeding, he lowered it to the floor. Kilgore, catching a spark of his ardor, came to his knees and looked up at the under side of the table. Sir Fandi, a grim smile under his beard, dropped into a chair and lighted a cigaret.

"Inscription," grunted the Canadian, and rose. "Looks like Manchu and Chinese, what?"

"Mongol, also Chinese," corrected Severn, a flush of

excitement in his face. "The Mongol is well preserved—I've been copying it. I can read nearly all of it. Listen!"

Kilgore opened a box of cigarets and flung himself into a chair. Sir Fandi watched the American, still smiling, yet mildly curious despite himself. Severn clutched at the tabletop, reading there what he had copied and written on the stone with red wax:

"The period name is gone, but we don't need it—this thing was built by Ung-khan in the sixth year, a year of the Yellow Rat, and was dedicated on the first day of the eleventh month, a day of the White Cock. Understand what that means? Do you understand? It's the most ancient Mongol inscription we have, of course, but the name Ung-khan and the titles! Here is the significant title, from the Chinese text—the word ngu-se-ta! It's a representation of the Persian ustad, which in turn rendered the Hebrew rab or rabbi.

"Now wait! Here Ung-khan calls himself ngu-se-ta, or teacher, of God, and also beloved of Buddha. He was a lama, but also a Christian—a not uncommon circumstance among the Tatars."

"What of it?" demanded Kilgore, smiling at the earnestness of Severn.

"What of it? Good —, man! It confirms the old supposition—this Ung-khan was not only a hereditary lama of the form of Buddhism then extant here, but he was also the teacher of God! The Nestorian monks, finding him a lama or priest, reported that John

Prebuteros——”

“Prester John!” exclaimed Kilgore, snapping to his feet. “D’you mean——”

“We’re in the church of Prester John this minute—and——”

Day appeared in the doorway with a cool interruption.

“And we’re likely to stay there a —— of a long time,” he cut in. “Gentlemen, we’ve found mighty little loot in this place. I don’t like to cut in upon a scientific discussion, but two things interest me a —— sight more than relics; first is loot, and second is the getaway. Do you chaps know what we’re up against?”

Obviously Day had been doing some thinking. He went on stubbornly:

“Esrun, whoever he is, seems to have all the loot—let it pass. But this same Esrun, blast him, is going to signal the five novices who jumped poor Sheng Wu to get here and go up against us with the tribe. We can’t hold out here indefinitely. Our one best bet is to find this chap Esrun and find him quick! Get me?”

Sir Fandi assented mildly.

“Quite right, gentlemen. I propose we abandon archeology in favor of defense——”

“Very well,” snapped Kilgore, sitting down. “Sir Fandi, your report?”

“All went off excellently,” returned the Rajput. “We bagged the caravan complete— it will arrive here before daylight. I rode on with five men, leaving six to bring

the camels—”

“Lost four men, eh? Dashed good work you lost no more, Fandi,” said Kilgore. “That gives us a total force of twenty-one Sikhs. But go ahead—pardon me.”

“We found ten girls with the caravan—fifteen camels in all. We shot every man in the crowd; the girls were all Mongol or Chinese. No one escaped. But we saw no sign of any flocks or herds or villages in the farther valleys. Beyond doubt, the tribe has gone bodily upon some such errand—”

“As the destruction of Sheng Wu and the caravan,” added Day bluntly.

Severn dropped into a chair and took a cigaret. He was badly shaken by the supreme excitement of his recent discovery—and yet he realized they must forget the past and face the future. Kilgore glanced around, his face grave.

“Day has hit the mark, lads! We broke off a seance here; therefore Esrin will guess at what’s happened—whether he can pick our brains or not, I can’t say. Odds are he will instruct the novices with the tribe to come here and finish us off. If he directs the campaign, we’re in for it, should we stay here!

“I’ll take first shot; then you fellows speak your minds. We have two courses open. We can take the supplies here, load up the camels in the caravan and those behind the temple, and we may get clear away. Or else we may remain. In that case we’ll have first to fight the Darkan tribe, then all the Mongols within a hundred

miles—and we'll have no hope of succor or aid. Question—fight or run, Sir Fandi?"

"By the sin of the sack of Chitor!" swore the lordly Rajput angrily. "Am I a thief to come and strike in the night, and then run? I stay!"

"Same here," said Day. "Besides, we haven't any loot to speak of, yet."

Severn nodded. Kilgore lighted a fresh cigaret and also nodded.

"Unanimous. We stay! Having decided to remain, shall we strike out in the morning, leaving this citadel of defense unguarded, to polish off Esrin?"

Severn spoke up.

"You know where this Esrin is?"

"No. Somewhere about the lake in the box canyon. We'll have to find him. Both Sir Fandi and I have seen the lake, but we've not explored it."

"You think he is one man, alone?"

"We think so. We really know very little; but that is the supposition."

"Very well." Severn, now quite cool, smiled in his gentle fashion. "I am not a fighter. I am an investigator, an explorer. I will go to the lake and find Esrin—"

"Accepted, but you shan't go alone," snapped Kilgore. "It's a damnable place; the night mist off the lake is anesthetic in effect, and there are rifts among the rocks that go down to smoke and fire in the earth's heart. I suggest—"

"I go," said Sir Fandi, stroking at his beard

complacently. "If Mr. Severn will accept me, I can guide him to the lake."

"Gladly!" assented Severn.

"So proposed and carried," hurried on Kilgore. "Now, what about these ten girls who'll get here at dawn? What can we do with 'em?"

"Give them rooms to themselves," spoke up Day, "explain matters, and supply 'em with guns. Believe me, these women can fight! I know."

So the matter was arranged, and in five minutes the comrades-in-arms were seeking rest for the remainder of the night.

Severn slept fitfully; indeed, his brain was too excited by what he had discovered to readily admit of slumber. He was anxious to make an exact copy of that bilingual inscription in the table or altar. He admitted that his theory had been hasty and presented certain difficulties; yet it carried out the statements of Polo, Rubruk and the invariably authentic Abu'lfaraj.

In his mind's eye he could see the wandering Nestorians converting the Mongol chief, baptizing him Yuhanna, consenting to his retaining the dual role of Christian and lamaistic priest, and reporting to their Bagdad metropolitan that this John the presbyter—for so they would translate the word lama—was a convert. A sound theory, for the Nestorians had metropolitans through China and Turkestan, and so strong a church that the plan had even been put forward of the Christian Mongols coming from the east to join the Crusaders in

the recovery of Palestine.

And this, then, was the church of Prester John! Severn fairly ached to go over every inch of the place, get measurements and rubbings, confirm his hasty theory by sound investigation—but now time pressed. There was other and more immediate work to his hand, and he must do it first. Personal safety came ahead of theories.

So gradually his riotous brain quieted, and he slept. Yet in his slumber came dreams—begotten, as Freud might declare, of the eager impulses so firmly checked and denied. He saw a strange withered figure, its face as the face of some ancient mummy, white locks ragged about the sunken eyes, and across the breast, in letters of fire, the Mongol name of Esrûn. The figure reached one skinny hand and gripped him by the shoulder—

“All out!” came the voice of Day. “Up, Severn! Breakfast and daybreak!”

CHAPTER VI

THE ABODE OF ESRUN

As he rode away from the temple beside Sir Fandi Singh, in the early light of dawn, Severn fully understood that their errand was to be a scouting expedition as much as a blow at Esrûn. The unknown Esrûn must be destroyed, yes; but there remained the question of his fabulous wealth—which, according to Kilgore, supported the priests.

The members of the expedition had suffered a sea change; more correctly, a desert change. Severn recognized this, admitted it in himself, but dared not speak the thought. Twenty-four hours previously he, like the others, had been buoyed up by the idea of destroying a tremendously evil thing. They had looked forward to it as a labor of Hercules which would employ every atom of energy and strength.

Instead, the Ten had been wiped out almost in a moment. Their jeweled trappings remained as symbols of loot—these, and Severn's discovery of the inscription.

What a power lay in the name of Prester John! Imaginations were inflamed. Thoughts arose of some huge store of gems and gold, ancient treasures over which squatted the loathsome spider Esrûn. If Severn and Fandî Singh discovered Esrûn and the treasure—

"It was the gold of Fafnir that doomed Sigurd," said Severn moodily.

"Eh?" The Rajput glanced at him curiously, not catching his train of thought.

"Well, one can always use gold! If we are lucky, we shall find some fine dromedaries today. When we were here before, the priests kept fine stock in the valley by the lake—none of your shaggy Bactrians, but blooded racers, clipped and limbed like race-horses."

They drew up on a sand-crest and glanced back, waving to those who stood in the temple gateway. The camels of the captured caravan had just arrived and were crowded into the courtyard; the five-barred flag of China had been mounted above the gate; the scene was one of activity and bustle.

Then the horses went on. The two men rode in silence under the craggy cliffs, toward the right-hand fork of the great Y which formed the valleys. Armed and provisioned, they had only Esrûn to fear—for in the place to which they went no man but the priests had ever ventured.

Before them the sands lessened. Ere an hour had passed they were riding in a narrow defile enclosed by high rock walls; a winding, forbidding gorge which appeared to lead on interminably. Two hours later they were still following its windings, and according to Fandi Singh they would not sight their objective until nearly noon.

"There are no buildings at the lake, no ruins?" asked Severn.

"None," returned the Rajput. "It is no place where men would willingly live. Near by are the hell-pits into which the accursed priests throw the women ten times a year. We will come upon a sulfur spring before long."

Severn eyed the gorge without great liking.

"A strange combination of natural wonders!" he observed. "And a stranger combination of human wonders. Think of those Russians, absorbed into some Mongol tribe, settling here! And according to the inscription it might have been the same tribe of Krits, or Christians, which Ung-khan ruled. Perhaps this Esrin is the last of some forgotten race of lamas—well, no use wasting words in speculation."

Sir Fandi Singh shrugged his wide shoulders in assent to this last.

"There are strange things in these hills," he said thoughtfully. "Stranger than we have seen, stranger than we shall see. That is, Severn, if one can trust legend."

Severn laughed shortly.

"It seems that legend has led us aright so far."

"Aye, true enough. And yet I have heard tales." The Rajput plucked at his beard. "It is said that the Darkan tribe and others, employ such vapors as this lake gives off; draw them into huge bellows and seal them for future use in warfare."

"What? A primitive gas?"

"Exactly. But who knows? There is the sulfur spring—the water is good."

The gorge was widening. They rode up to a huge jet of water which leaped from the rock, discoloring everything around, and was gone again within twenty feet. The water was strongly impregnated, highly charged, but was excellent in taste.

The two rode on again, the oppressing walls of rock growing imperceptibly wider. Here was no great erosion, as Severn could perceive; in this bowl among the hills the elements had been futile. The place was primitive, volcanic. The way became strewn with blocks of shiny black obsidian fallen from the high cliffs. The walls were stratified with garish streaks of color from molten metals, intermingled ores. Presently another wayside spring appeared, this time of streaming water that jetted and hissed over the rocks.

Forward again. About them reigned a terrible and unearthly silence. There was no other token of human presence. The click of the horses' hoofs fled out upon the windless air and returned again from the high walls; a volley of echoes accompanied them, rose all about them, until it seemed that upon their heels marched a

cavalry of thousands, a ghostly company of shadows. When they spoke, the walls threw back the words in a storm of sibilant whisperings which smote them into silence.

How long a time passed, Severn did not remember; but it was long enough. Presently a burst of sunlight, and they were riding in the undiluted glory of midday—and now Fandi Singh drew rein and pointed ahead.

“The purple grass, the lake. The abode of Esrūn.”

Severn looked, and ahead of him, on a gentle declivity, made out stunted brush and the green of grass. Yet it was not the livid green of true chlorophyl, but a strange purplish-sheened green. Several dromedaries were in sight, grazing quietly; they inspected the two horsemen without fear. Toward the lake appeared low trees. The entire opening was truly a bowl among the mountains, walled in by inhospitable peaks and shut out of the world.

Beyond the trees came the shimmering glint of water. As he rode nearer Severn made out to the left a long flat overgrown with parasitic reeds which bore flowers of that very intense scarlet which nature often associates with danger.

“I think those reeds have something to do with the poisonous mists,” said Sir Fandi. “The flowers are oddly marked with a cross in black.”

“So? It is a botanical fact,” answered Severn thoughtfully, “that no plant bearing a cross is injurious

to man. Obviously the lake is receding from that flat. The mist may come from the mud, or from minute animalculae. What's the program?"

"Camp among the trees, turn the horses loose and await what happens."

Now, to the right and on the opposite side, Severn perceived that the lake was enclosed by walls of rock. It hardly deserved the name of lake, being a scant quarter-mile in diameter. The crags which arose straight out of the water were tortuous, twisted in mad shapes, and seemed to have been poured from molten stone. So, indeed, they had.

"This was once the maw of a volcano," said Severn when they dismounted. "A minor outlet, perhaps, of some ancient cone farther up in the peaks. Where are the steamy fissures you mentioned as being used for—er—burials?"

Fandi Singh, busy with his saddle-girths, waved his hand toward the right.

"Over there among the rocks."

The air was windless, hot, unstirred. When the horses were turned free to crop at the grass Severn strode down to the lakeside. Here were no shallows nor reeds, but a sandy shore and quick depth; the water was clear, cold, entirely innocuous.

Severn rejoined his companion. They lunched beneath the low trees, and Sir Fandi, who was still feeling the effects of his long and hard ride to catch the caravan, proposed that one watch and one sleep. Severn

was in no mood for sleep and gladly chose the first watch. The Rajput was lustily snoring within five minutes.

Pipe alight, Severn strolled along the shore to the right. There had been no attempt to conceal their presence. Hiding-places there were none; they must chance the possibility that Esrin was on guard and would see them. Yet in all this place was no hint of habitation, no token or evidence of any human presence besides their own. If Esrin were indeed here, he must himself be well concealed.

Severn realized suddenly that he was walking past an ordered series of plants. He halted, staring down. A little plot had been fenced about with boulders, and in this plot were growing leafless shoots to a height of six inches. Each shoot held half a dozen buds, none of which were open. Severn stooped and broke off one of the shoots. Studying it, he saw suddenly what it was.

"*Crocus sativus*—the saffron flower!" he exclaimed when he had opened one of the buds and found the three yellow stigmas. "Why is this being grown here, and nothing else?"

He passed on, wondering not a little.

After a little he found himself in a path, lightly beaten amid the purplish grass, and he followed it. This scarcely discernible trail led him to rocky ground, away from the lake and to the right. Suddenly, unexpectedly, he started back; a step farther and he would have gone into an orifice in the earth—a hole six feet wide,

extending across the path in a long crack. Then he saw that the path ended here.

He peered down over the edge and saw nothing. A choking sulfur-fume filled his nostrils and he stepped hastily backward. Then he stooped and from a rock where it clung picked up a wisp of torn silk. He understood now—he understood why that recently made path had led him here, and the manner in which the Ten disposed of their wives. He had not credited all Kilgore's tale, but now he credited everything.

The hours passed. Through the afternoon Severn sat beside the sleeping Rajput or strolled about. He found no indication of any human presence in the valley. Everything was deserted, empty, utterly ignoring the intrusion of man. The dromedaries were tame, and they were fine beasts, as Fandi Singh had said—blooded creatures such as were rarely seen in this part of Central Asia, racers of a fine breed.

The afternoon was waning when the Rajput awakened.

"Nothing has happened." Severn extended the saffron buds he had plucked. "You know what this is?"

The dark features of Sir Fandi lightened.

"Ah—the saffron fields of Pampur! I have not seen this outside Kashmir; you say it is growing here?"

Severn told of finding the bed of saffron roots. The Rajput frowned.

"That is singular! Well——"

"I have a plan," said Severn quietly. "We cannot stay here indefinitely, waiting for something to happen. We

know that Esrin communicates with his followers by telepathy; well, then let us communicate with him by the same means. We must bring him out to a meeting, as I understand the priests always did. In other words, will him here to us!"

"But he will know it is fraudulent——"

"I think not. He is some primitive creature like the rest, who has fallen heir to a power greater than his control or knowledge. He will not be able to read our minds. If we get the message to him, he will come."

"But I cannot think in Mongol!" and the Rajput smiled. "I do not know the tongue."

"I do. Besides," added Severn, "this is a matter of thought-impulse, not of words. If we reach him with the impulse, I believe we can effect something. Remember, he's waiting for word from his priests. He'll think we are——"

"I think it is all folly," said Sir Fandi with an air of resignation. "But let us try, by all means. En avant! Forward, my thoughts—charge!"

Severn smiled, and they sat silent.

CHAPTER VII

“NEITHER A FOREIGNER, NOR A CANTONESE.”

The waters of the little lake were unruffled. In the intense peace, the absolute silence of that bowl amid the hills, pierced a thin reedy sound. Sir Fandi stirred and spoke under his breath.

“A fish. This is the lake of singing fishes——”

“Quiet!” snapped Severn.

The Rajput scowled and obeyed. Severn was putting all his concentration of will into the effort he was making. Backed by the thought-impulse of Sir Fandi Singh, he was formulating in Mongol the message bidding Esrin come forth.

“The white men have seized the temple. Bring us gold for them, and they will go.”

Suddenly he became conscious of the impact of another thought beating at his brain. He was utterly



relaxed in every nerve and muscle, and it was a moment before he realized the import of this attacking thought. It was an assent, a bidding to be at peace. Under its compellant force Severn reached out and touched the arm of Sir Fandi.

"Be ready," he said quietly. "He is coming."

The Rajput gazed at him in startled wonder, not unmixed with awe. This transference of thought was something outside the cosmos of Sir Fandi; indeed, Severn himself was by no means sure of it. He had spoken on impulse, by intuition.

The two men came to their feet, pistol in hand. They did not know what to look for. Indeed, they were prepared for some eery and unearthly demonstration as they watched that unruffled lake where no wind ever touched. Upon them was a strange sense of awed expectation, of something about to happen beyond the ordinary.

Yet, when it came, it was simple.

Sir Fandi was first to perceive it and touched the American's arm. Severn looked, and from among the rocks to the right saw a rude canoe shoving out into the lake. He marked the spot, and fancied that the craft came from around some projecting corner of the cliff which must mask an opening.

A single figure stood erect in the canoe. It was a figure muffled from head to foot in a faded winding of yellow cloths. The canoe and paddle seemed rude and rough.

Sir Fandi threw up his automatic, but Severn checked him, laid finger to lips in a gesture of silent caution. That singular figure in the canoe was turning the craft toward shore; it seemed perfectly sentient, yet quite unaware that enemies were waiting. Severn could perceive no eye-holes in the mask of yellow cloth, and an odd fear came upon him. There was something uncanny in this slow but unfaltering approach, in this blind automaton! Yet he knew the explanation must be simple enough.

The two men stared. If Esrún had eyes in his head, he could see that they were not his priests but the dreaded white men. Still he swept the canoe in straight for the shore, silent and unswerving. Suddenly Esrún bent down, caught the gunnel, waited. The high bow of the rude craft floated forward and grated upon the shore. The saffron figure straightened, stepped into the water, pulled up the craft.

Now, bending above his canoe, Esrún brought into sight a heavy bundle, wrapped in a skin. Staggering with its weight, he dropped this on the shore, then stood erect and made a gesture as if inviting approach. Sir Fandi looked at Severn, but the latter shook his head in negation.

For a moment Esrún waited, then turned. Slowly that yellow figure made its way along the shore to the little bed of crocus. There it paused, and put forth a hand to touch the fence of boulders. At this gesture a light broke upon Severn; he could barely repress an



ejaculation.

Esrn was blind!

The Rajput had seen it also. He gave Severn a startled glance of inquiry, and Severn nodded. Esrn knelt and touched the unopened buds of the saffron flowers with brown fingers. Then, together, the two men ran forward.

At their approach Esrn came erect, facing toward them inquiringly. They gave him no chance to escape; at the first movement Severn caught an upflung arm, while Sir Fandi tore away that muffling yellow cloth. Under his hand, Severn felt no attempt at escape, no bulge of muscle; the arm in his hands was withered, wooden, horrible to the touch.

The yellow cloths were half torn away. Esrn stood there before them half-naked—and the two men took a backward step with horror in their eyes. For the thing which they had captured was a leper, grimacing and leering frightfully toward them—and further, this leprous Esrn was, or had been, a woman!

Severn dropped an oath. An old woman she was, a hag in all truth, ravaged by the fearful disease, and she stood there without attempting to evade them. None the less, the two men knew that in this frightful body dwelt a perilous brain which threatened to engulf them and their comrades unless it were killed.

But—a woman!

“Do it, Rajput,” said Severn curtly, half-turning away.

Sir Fandi flung him a look of wild scorn and fury. "Do it, American!" he snapped back. "The honor of a Rajput is as a sword-blade, and I do not choose to sully mine with the blood of a leprous Kashmiri woman! Do it!"

But Severn knew that he could not do it. The unreality of the scene was maddening—this ancient scarred remnant of humanity grimacing at them, the two of them standing there armed yet helpless, and the lives of better men hanging upon the extinguishment of that rotten brain! Yet, because this was a woman, Severn could not lift his hand to pistol.

In that instant of silence and thwarted endeavor Severn perceived what the words of Sir Fandi implied. This woman had come from the far south, from Kashmir in India—no doubt a leper who had fled from British jurisdiction. She had brought into the waste places the sacred saffron bulbs, the memory of her lost ways and blood and tradition. By what means she had found this place, there was no telling; but she had found it, and had taken the name of Brahma, or Esrn, and—

From the creature broke a wild laugh, a laugh that sickened Severn, and then she spoke in broken English.

"Aye, do it! Do it, sahibs—burra sahibs, do it!"

"Peace, unclean thing," growled Sir Fandi.

At this, without warning, the hideous being whipped a pistol from her half-removed cloths and fired pointblank. The Rajput staggered, threw out his hands, fell without a cry. Esrn fired again, this time at Severn,



and the bullet almost touched his head.

Something broke in him and before he knew what happened he found himself standing with a smoking pistol in his hand, the nameless creature sprawled dead upon the saffron flowers, horror and fury boiling in his brain. He flung aside his weapon and knelt above Sir Fandi Singh, who had been shot through the body. The Rajput was unconscious.

A swift examination showed Severn that the bullet had gone clean through, missing any vital part, and that with care Sir Fandi would make recovery. With care! How was he to find care in this place—where, with night, would come the mists that produced sleep and death—where there was no shelter, no help, nothing?

Severn darted up and went to their camping-place, where he procured some material for bandages. Returning, he halted beside the boat, scanning the cliffs. No, that was out of the question; whether the abode of Esrin were the tomb of Genghis Khan or not, it had been the home of a leper—and Severn dared not take the chance of infecting the Rajput's wound.

He glanced down at the bundle Esrin had brought ashore. The skin had burst open, for it was some ancient and rotted hide; a stream of gold-pieces poured forth upon the sand. Severn stooped, thrust a few of the broad gold disks into his pocket, then leaped up and ran to his companion, cursing his own folly.

As he bandaged the wounded man, his thoughts raced ahead. To stay in this place were madness; to attempt to

reach the temple and get help were equal madness, until Sir Fandi recovered his senses, at least. Another man might have left the Rajput, and spurred out to bring help—but something held back Severn. Some premonition, some acute sense of danger, held him here. Perhaps it was his own strong instinct of self-dependence.

He decided upon a middle course. Within a few moments he had caught and saddled the horses and led the white stallion back to the Rajput. As he bent to raise the senseless body, a blade of the purplish grass drew across his left thumb, cutting into the skin. The sharp sting of the pain made him start; then he smiled at the occurrence. To pass through what he had met, and then to flinch at the cut of a grass-blade!

Presently Severn got his companion limply into the saddle, intent upon getting out of this hell-pit before night brought the deathly mist from the water. He bound the drooping figure in place, knowing that he dared not take Sir Fandi far in this wise, since the motion of the horse would hold open the wound and drain the body of blood; but it would serve.

Getting into his own saddle, he took the bridle of the stallion and set forth. Already the sun had gone from sight in the sky above, although in the outer world it would not yet be sunset. Severn directed the horses at a fast walk for the entrance defile.

Hours later, it seemed, Severn found himself in a



makeshift camp beside the hot spring in the defile. He had set out canteens of the water to cool. They had food enough to last for days. Farther than this he had not dared to come, for the jolting was too severe on the wounded Rajput, who had lost much blood. Severn himself felt a singular light-headedness, and he was bitterly conscious of that slight slit in his left thumb, which caused much annoyance as such small things will.

When morning came Severn found that a swirling fever was getting a grip upon him, and the thumb was swollen and painful. Alarmed, he tried to open it up and alleviate the inflammation, but without much result. Sir Fandi had gone into a deep coma of exhaustion, and Severn did not disturb him. He could see that the Rajput's wound was looking in bad shape.

With noon Severn prepared some food and forced the Rajput to eat. Sir Fandi wakened but seemed like a drunken man, and fell asleep again immediately after eating. Severn, who now perceived clearly that he himself was growing hourly worse and that he must have been given some septic infection from that purplish grass, was intensely alarmed.

When the afternoon drew on toward evening, Sir Fandi Singh wakened in great weakness, but with a clear head. Severn, flushed and almost incoherent, related to him all that had taken place. The Rajput raised himself to his elbow and smiled.

"To the temple, Severn! I'm in a bad way, but you're in worse. We must get there at all costs. Place me in the

saddle, and I'll stick there—born to it. You're the one to be tied on. If we start at once, we'll get to the temple some time tonight—possibly not until morning. But we must get there. Kilgore had drugs and medicines.”

Severn assented. They made another meal, and then got into the saddle. The effort of saddling and of helping Sir Fandi up almost finished Severn, but he clambered aboard and they were off by dark. There was no losing the way in this defile.

To Severn, that night was a purgatory of swirling torment and mad visions. Before his fevered brain danced the horrible figure of Esrin, the Kashmiri woman; Sir Fandi stated that she was beyond doubt a Rajput of some high blood, but Severn was past reasoning the thing out. The hours dragged in terror and frightful agony.

With the dawn the horses were picking their own way toward the temple. Sir Fandi was riding in grim silence, saying nothing of the broken clots that let his wound bleed afresh. Severn saw the flag waving over the gateway of the temple and in a mad fantasy put spurs to his horse and went ahead at a gallop. The Rajput followed slowly, silently.

Severn reined up in the courtyard. His fevered brain was astonished by the silence which greeted him—no shout of welcome, no sound at all! On the walls he could see the figures of the Sikhs. In the courtyard he could see the machine gun trained on the gateway, with three Sikhs seated beside it. Yet they did not rise at his

approach.

He dismounted.

When Sir Fandi rode into that courtyard he saw Severn lying senseless on the sand. And down upon them looked the Sikhs from the walls, with dead eyes that saw not. The Rajput painfully got out of the saddle, staggered, fell, came to his feet again. He drew his pistol and fired twice in the air.

There was no response.

CHAPTER VIII

“STEEL BODY NEEDS IRON FOOD.”

—Proverb.

Sheng Wu was a little Chinaman with Oxford and Glasgow degrees, a Croix de Guerre and a bland smile that concealed a bull-dog jaw. Behind him, to the Temple of the Ten Dromedaries, rode thirty stalwart Manchu camelmen.

Out in the desert Sheng Wu had been attacked. He ordered his men to scatter in the dusk of evening and gave up the caravan to the raiders. In the dusk of dawn he had fallen upon those raiders, occupied with their loot, and had smitten them hip and thigh. Then, with thirty men remaining, he had consulted his maps and ridden forward. And now he was riding up to that open and unguarded temple, where a torn five-barred flag floated over the gateway.

Dead men lined the walls. Sheng Wu rode forward alone, with one Manchu officer, and dismounted inside the open gateway. When he turned from his kneeling camel, he saw that this temple was an abode of the dead, and that these dead had been Sikh troopers.

He called forward his men and ordered them to search. He went with the foremost and they discovered no living creature. At last they came to a rear chamber of the temple and when they opened the door a great gaunt figure rose before them. Sheng Wu looked twice at it and then saluted.

"I am here, Sir Fandi," he said.

The Rajput uttered a frightful laugh. Torn bandages, blood-rusted, encased his body; his proud features were haggard, his eyes were flaming things. He pointed to a brick bed in the corner, upon which lay the tossing body of Severn.

"Glad you showed up," he returned. The words came from him almost mechanically. He spoke as a man in a dream. "You'll have to attend to Severn. Septic poisoning—take off his left arm at the elbow, I fancy."

"What has happened here? How did the Sikhs die? They appear unwounded—"

"I don't know." The Rajput made a gesture of futility, of fearful ignorance. "We came back—found things like this—no sleep—wounded—lost blood—took care of Severn—"

He staggered, reeled slightly, recovered.

"Kilgore and Day?" queried Sheng Wu.

"Not here. Gone. No message. Vanished, that's all. Glad you showed up—in time—"

The words died. Sir Fandi Singh jerked twice through his whole body, then collapsed in a limp heap.

Sheng Wu examined him, then went to the brick bed and examined Severn. He had the two men carried into a clean room, then produced a case of surgical instruments from his baggage.

These things happened in the morning. At noon Sheng Wu left the operating-room, bathed himself and spent an hour examining such of the bodies on the walls as were in condition to tell him anything. When he had finished he summoned his thirty Manchus into the courtyard and calmly addressed them.

"This place is an abode of devils."

They assented in silence—it was something they already knew.

"These soldiers died and no shot was fired. They were suffocated or killed with gas. Two of their leaders have vanished utterly. If we remain here, the same fate will befall us, for we know not whence it comes. Therefore, we shall not remain here."

To this the Manchus assented very eagerly. Sheng Wu lighted his tobacco-pipe and resumed, when the tiny pinch of tobacco had gone, his explanations.

"Sir Fandi Singh is wounded and the wound is much inflamed. He has lost much blood and he will not walk or speak for many days. His friend, the strange white man, has lost an arm through poisoned blood and is in

fever. Each of these men must ride in a sling between two camels. Make ready the slings at once. We leave here at sunset, in order to pass through the valley by night, when there will be no whirling sands."

"The baggage that we have saved?" questioned the Manchu officer.

"Abandon what is not needed. We shall not go the way we came, but strike direct for Urga."

Thus it was done. As a matter of fact, Sheng Wu was horribly frightened. These men, for whom he had intense respect and admiration, had succumbed to some unknown enemy. He dared not linger lest he and his men succumb also; in fact, even had he lingered, he knew that the Manchus would not have remained. Panic had them in its grip.

Sheng Wu tarried only to pack up the unused machine gun and a few objects collected for removal by Kilgore. He found no indication of the fate met by Day and the Canadian. They had vanished, that was all—and Sheng Wu was of the opinion that they really had vanished, perhaps carried away by devils. Under the veneer of education the old blood of Han still burned hot and cold in him, and the man feared exceedingly.

Three weeks later Severn sat beside a stinking fire of camel's dung and talked with the gaunt shadow that had been Fandi Singh the Rajput. Severn himself was little more than shadow, and his left arm was gone at the elbow; yet he lived.

"Tomorrow we shall reach Urga," he was saying

hopelessly. "And what then?"

"Faith," said the voice of Sir Fandi.

The Rajput was still a very sick man. Severn laughed bitterly.

"Faith—how? Shall we go back to look for them?"

"If we live."

"Then, how? We cannot do it without money. I have none."

The other did not answer for a while. When he spoke, it was of the place they had left.

"Our fate was upon us, Severn. If you and I had gone to the temple, we would have perished with the others—I think they died from that accursed gas. Perhaps some of the hill people came to the temple by stealth and loosed the gas."

"Yet there was no sign of Kilgore and Day." Severn turned as, out of the shadows, the little figure of Sheng Wu came and joined them at the fire. "Are you quite sure, Sheng Wu, that you found no indication of Kilgore and Day? You haven't lied for the sake of lending us hope?"

"They were not there," answered the son of Han. "Nor was there any sign of them."

"Then they are alive, and we shall go back to find them," said Sir Fandi Singh, his voice ringing more firm.

"But how?" questioned Severn. "One must have supplies, camels, men, money and —"

The white teeth of the Rajput flashed in the shadows. Sheng Wu smiled blandly.

"I think," said the latter, "that we shall find Shansi bankers in Urga. And any Shansi banker in China will honor the check of Sir Fandi Singh in any amount."

"They had better," said the Rajput grimly.

Severn struggled for readjustment. He had not known that the Rajput was wealthy—had never thought about it, in fact. Presently he nodded, for his heart was with the two men who had vanished so completely.

"Good," he said. "Then we shall go. I'm sorry you were so frank to own your fear of that place, Sheng Wu. You're a fine leader, and these Manchus certainly respect you—and both Fandi and I owe you a lot. I wish you would go back with us; but there's no use asking you, I suppose."

Sheng Wu had been very frank, indeed, in expressing his fear of that place. Now he produced his long tobacco-pipe, stuffed black tobacco into the tiny steel bowl, lighted it at the fire and smoked until the few puffs were gone. Then he smiled.

"Well," he observed, "I do rather wish you fellows would ask me, you know!"

There was an instant of silence; then the voice of Sir Fandi Singh rang out like a trumpet.

"By the sin of the sack of Chitor—we three are men! Then it's settled."

And Severn nodded, almost happily.

CHAPTER IX

THE CAPTIVES

Some weeks after the conquering yet conquered caravan of Sheng Wu had turned its face toward Urga, a party of five Mongol horsemen came riding through the defile to the lake of singing fishes—the lake presided over by the mysterious Esrûn.

These five had a companion, a captive, whose wrists were firmly bound behind his back. This captive had suffered a horrible fate. Over his body to the waist had been loosely bound a fresh hide, in which had been cut three holes; two, to permit the passage of his arms, the third, opposite his mouth, to permit his eating and drinking.

The sun had dried and shriveled this skin until it had become, as it were, an outer epidermis. Beneath it the unfortunate man was blind, deaf, insensible to any

outward change. Sometimes a wretched victim has been known to be sewn into a fresh skin and left in the desert sun until the shrinking skin killed him. This captive, however, had not been granted so merciful a fate.

These six riders came in silence. They were filthy with all the dirt of unwashed Mongols, yet certain of them possessed gray or blue eyes, and on one the hair was decidedly tawny. They were members of the Darkan tribe which Sheng Wu had scattered afar. Obviously they were frightened of this place; they rode in fear, their eyes searching grass and lake and crags with swift glances. Yet they rode on toward the lake, not pausing until they drew rein at the shore.

There, as one man, they watched their horses. These sturdy Mongol ponies had no fear, but sniffed the water, strained eagerly toward it. The five riders glanced at one another, exchanged a quick nod of satisfaction and dismounted. The captive, who perceived nothing of what passed around him, remained in his saddle as his mount leaned down to the water. Nor did his captors pay him any regard.

Heedless of their beasts, likewise, the five Mongols seated themselves on the bank, produced dirty pipes of various kinds, and smoked. At length one of them spoke. He did not address his comrades. Instead, he looked out at the lake and spoke to the invisible Esrûn.

"We have obeyed your orders, sublime ancestor!"

He checked himself abruptly, upon his brutish face an expression of intense astonishment, while he stared at

the lake. After a moment he turned to his companions.

"Esrún commands us to make our report without speaking. Can any of you do this?"

One after another shook their heads. With some terror now mingled into the astonishment of his visage, the leader looked again at the lake.

"We do not know how to do this, Esrún," he said.

There was something terrible in the simplicity of his utterance—in the confession of this man who could receive thoughts without sending them. Here was a child playing with vast forces of the intellect; a primitive barbarian who infringed upon secret things before which civilized science stood hesitant!

"Very well." Suddenly his face cleared. He glanced at his companions, who nodded assent. They, too, had caught the message. "Esrún commands us to speak. I obey!"

"We have cleared the temple of the bodies of the barbarians who were destroyed by the sacred vapors. We have taken their weapons, such as remained. We have preserved the life of this white man who led them. According to your orders, we have brought him here unharmed. We await your orders."

He remained silent, gazing at the lake. One would have said that the mysterious Esrún was now reduced to dire straits; the temple priests and novices having perished, telepathic communication was established with bestial creatures such as these, incapable of sending forth a thought!

At this instant, however, was afforded an instance of the remarkable powers of that terrible being who dwelt in a cavern of the lake. One of the five men rose to his feet, while the others darted at him glances of surprize.

"Very well," he said. "I obey."

He advanced to the group of horses, now cropping at the purplish-green grass, and unlashed the figure of the captive. Seizing the latter's arm, he drew the helpless man from the saddle and left him sitting in the grass. He then rejoined his companions.

After an instant the leader again turned to his four comrades.

"Esrûn commands us to return home. You have heard?"

"We have heard," was the mutter.

The five rose. They gave a last curious look at the grass, at the saffron beds, at the water and the gloomy crags which rose from it. Then they went to the horses. With grunts and savage exclamations they hurled themselves into their saddles, lashed the unwilling brutes fiercely and rode rapidly away, delighted to be gone. With them went the horse which the captive had ridden.

The captive himself remained sitting in the grass.

Before the five riders had gained the mouth of the long and tortuous defile which gave access to the outer world, they drew rein swiftly and bunched together. Leaving the defile and advancing to the lake had appeared a second group of horsemen—again five in number, a captive in the center of the group.

This captive, unlike the first, was not shrouded; nor, at first sight, did he appear to be bound. Upon closer view, however, it proved that from each hand, from each foot, and from about his neck, ran a cord which connected him to one of the five Mongols around him. Thus he was more securely bound than with chains, for, with one simultaneous movement of their ponies, these five Mongols could disjoint his entire body.

The man was Day, the American. Naked to the waist, sun-blackened, bearded, his torso showed plain evidences of privation, suffering, torture. Yet from his haggard features, his eyes gleamed out boldly as ever; and his enormous frame, instead of being depleted and weakened by his experiences, appeared to be hardened into the consistency of iron.

These five Mongols saluted the five who had brought the first captive. They belonged to a different branch of the Darkan tribe, but they too were among the number of those who had exterminated Kilgore's band at one stroke. Gases from the subterranean rifts at the eastern side of the lake, confined in hide bags and loosened down-wind, had wiped out the Sikhs to a man. Yet these barbarians of the white steppes were not the first to make use of such weapons.

The Mongols among whom Day rode did not pause to speak with their fellows, but pursued their course toward the lake. At sight of the other party their fears had vanished altogether. They stared about them curiously, discussed the half-dozen hobbled racing

dromedaries who were grazing in the valley, became more at their ease. Once, when Day made an abrupt movement, the five made their horses suddenly jump away, his arms and legs extended horribly, his head jerked forward, Day uttered a groan. The five grinned and loosened the cords. He settled again in the saddle, motionless.

When the party approached the lake shore, Day eyed that silent hooded figure without other thought than that it might be Esrin, perhaps. He had long since given up Kilgore and his companions for dead—ever since that frightful night when he and Kilgore had discovered all their Sikhs dead, and when skin-clad figures had leaped on them out of the darkness. Ah, that had been a night to remember!

He had not seen Kilgore since that night.

Near the bound and hooded figure, which did not move as they approached, the five dismounted and spread out. They signed to Day and he painfully climbed out of the saddle, glaring about him. The five, grinning, drew the cords taut and sat down. Day, for want of anything better to do, followed suit.

Although the Mongols examined the hooded figure curiously, they perhaps knew what it was, for they paid it little heed after the first arrival. Their leader evidently was uncertain as to Esrin's abode, for he looked up into the sky and spoke.

"We have obeyed your orders, sublime ancestor! Can you hear my voice?"

To any one who had heard the rather skilful communication established by the first party, this present speech would have appeared laughable. The Mongol, obviously, was none too certain of himself or Esrin, for he bellowed his words at the sky as if trusting they would pierce to heaven by sheer weight.

Yet they must have reached Esrin. After a moment the Mongol turned astonished eyes to his comrades. They nodded vigorously and one of them spoke.

"Esrin says to proceed! Then do so!"

"Good!" exclaimed the leader. "It is evident that I am not a khan for nothing, since I can make my words pierce to heaven. Esrin, do you hear? We have arrived. We have brought this unspeakable dog of a white barbarian, and we have not hurt him much. We are glad to be rid of him. If you had not ordered us to spare him, we would have killed him long ago, for he has killed three of our men since we captured him."

At this the features of Day were overspread with a gloomy satisfaction.

"Shall we sacrifice him here to you, Esrin?" shouted the Mongol, and waited hopefully.

After a short interval his countenance expressed a brutish resignation and he gave Day a glance and a shrug. He looked at his companions.

"Is this right? Does Esrin say to leave him here and depart?"

The others nodded.

"To leave him unharmed," added one with emphasis.

The leader sprang to his feet.

"Then cut the cords and go!" he cried, setting the example by severing the cord which bound Day's neck to his wrist.

For an instant Day sat staring at them in dazed stupefaction, unable to credit their actions. Four of the Mongols caught their horses, leaped into the saddle and went dashing away hastily. The fifth delayed a moment to catch the horse which had carried the American.

This moment of delay destroyed him.

Day came to his feet as if set on steel springs. The long severed cords trailed after him. He made one leap, and from the remaining Mongols burst a cry of terror; a second leap, and Day was at the man's saddle.

Two minutes later Day stood at the edge of the lake, holding between his huge hands the shaken and broken Mongol. He seized the man's knife, then cast it down—and with one hand hurled the wretched man headlong into the water.

"You're the one who held a hot iron to my back, eh?" he exclaimed. "Well, there's a present for you—water for iron, cold for heat! How do you like it, you devil?"

The Mongol did not reappear to make answer. After an instant Day turned away, his eye following the two horses who were running after the four Mongols. Then he observed the hooded and bound figure sitting in the grass.

For a little space Day studied that figure suspiciously,

intently. Then he picked up the knife torn from the Mongol and approached the silent figure.

“By the Lord!” he cried suddenly. “White feet!”

CHAPTER X

“SO TO FRONT DEATH,
AS MEN MIGHT JUDGE US PAST IT.”

—Jonson

When Day had cut the bound wrists and ankles and was carefully slitting the skin hood of that silent figure, his hand trembling as he worked, a voice issued from beneath the skin. The voice was calm, cool, imperturbable.

“Thanks very much,” it said.

“Oh, the devil!” exclaimed Day.

“Not at all,” returned the voice. “Kilgore.”

With a violent movement Kilgore flung off the stiffly clinging skin. Then, swiftly, he clapped both hands to his face. The brilliant sunlight was blinding.

“Quite all right in a moment or so,” he murmured.

Day stared at him with fallen jaw. The change in Kilgore was terrible beyond words; the trim Canadian

was scarcely recognizable. Not by reason of the bearded face alone, but by the frightful pallor of the entire torso. Hooded from all touch of light and air, the man's skin had become a livid, a dead and colorless white.

"That you, Day?" asked Kilgore, attempting to peep between his fingers. "I say, what's happened? Where are we?"

"Dashed if I know," answered the American. "Somewhere near Esrin, I guess. Here, get up and take my arm! You get out of this sunlight, or you'll be parboiled in ten minutes."

Kilgore nodded and rose. Day led him beneath the trees and halted in the shade. By degrees Kilgore was able to perceive their situation and to observe Day.

"You are a rum-looking beggar!" he said dryly. "I imagine I'm equally handsome, what? Hello, are we free?"

"Free among the dead," grunted the other.

"Don't quote from Scripture—just yet," and Kilgore chuckled. "You hit it right, old man—this is the lake of singing fishes, where Esrin lives. See here, what's become of Severn and Fandi Singh?"

"Ask Esrin, not me," returned Day. "My late entertainers rode up and left me here beside you. I got one of 'em, at least! They had orders not to injure us."

Kilgore rose to his feet, a trifle unsteadily.

"Come along," he said, removing the few rags that clothed him and blinking at the water. "May as well die clean, eh?"

"Die?" exclaimed Day. "Why, they've turned us loose, man!"

The visage of Kilgore broke into a pallid caricature of his old smile.

"Come, come, my dear fellow!" he said gaily. "We're perfectly helpless and have been left here as a sacrifice to Esrûn. We shall probably be tortured scientifically, and then dropped into a rift among the rocks—fire and brimstone and so forth."

Day swore angrily and his eyes bit around the valley. Already the strong soul of him was revived by this touch of freedom, this contact with Kilgore; his unquenchable spirit was surging pugnaciously.

"We're not lost!" he exclaimed. "There are dromedaries—we can——"

Kilgore clapped him on the shoulder with a ringing laugh.

"Guards at the entrance, and probably a rifle or two trained on us this moment! No, we must preserve our dignity, old chap——"

"—— dignity! I'd sooner preserve our lives!"

Kilgore burst out laughing.

"Come along, Yank! Let's bathe."

Day followed him to the water's edge, comprehending, yet stubbornly contesting, the fact that there was no hope for them.

When they had bathed and returned to the shade of the trees, Kilgore was something more like himself again. He had noted the beds of saffron, which now

were in full bloom, and he sent Day for a blossom. He examined the petal with keen interest.

"Saffron," he said, a retrospective look in his sunken eyes. "Comes from Kashmir—I was there as a child. My father was stationed there."

"That's where you first knew Fandi Singh?" queried Day shrewdly.

Kilgore nodded.

"Quite so. He's a rajah, you know. We grew up together in the palace. My uncle, Sir Cecil Kilgore, had quite a bit to do with the Government in the old days. Ho, hum! It's a far cry to the water of Kashmir!"

"There's a boat," observed Day abruptly.

They fell silent, watching the lake. A few words from his companion had apprized Kilgore of the manner in which the Mongols had communed with Esrûn. Knowing that he had destroyed the ten priests, that Fandi Singh had destroyed five of the novices, he could only conjecture why none of the remaining five were on hand. They had, in effect, been destroyed by Sheng Wu; but of this Kilgore knew nothing. Since the Mongols had communicated with Esrûn, however, it was evident that Esrûn still existed. Ergo, Severn had failed to kill the master of mystery.

The rude craft, with its single erect figure shrouded in faded yellow cloths, was an eery thing. It stole toward them in silence, and that silence was oppressive, awesome. To neither of the two white men did it occur that this figure was Esrûn.

They both were keyed up to thoughts of torture, death, violence. Therefore, the appearance of this shrouded figure peacefully creeping to them was a decided shock; it shattered their initiative, left them hesitant and perplexed.

The boat touched the shore, halted. The erect figure stretched forth a shrouded, beckoning arm, and uttered a single word in English.

“Come!”

The two men looked at each other.

“Say the word,” growled Day, “and——”

Kilgore shook his head, shrugged slightly and walked to the boat. Day followed him, eying the saffron figure with suspicion. They entered the boat, sitting on a wide forward thwart. Without a word the shrouded figure shoved off, moving with a mechanical precision which impressed Kilgore as singular. He could not fathom the reason for this oddity, since he did not know that their guide was blind. Now Day touched his arm, and both men stared at the place to which they were going.

The opening among the crags on the right, into which the boat was slowly heading, gave access to a long and narrow cleft. At the head of this cleft appeared a sandy beach twenty feet wide and as many deep, ending in an ancient portal of stone, built against the solid cliff. This portal framed the black opening of a cavern.

When the prow of the boat touched the sand an inarticulate word came from the guide. Kilgore turned, to perceive something held out to him in a fold of the

yellow cloth. It was a box of vestas. He took them mechanically—and was then handed his own cigaret-case.

“Upon my word!” he murmured, then collected himself.

He opened the case.

“I say, Day, look here! After you.”

“Come!” growled the American, his face lighting up.

“This doesn’t look much like torture!”

Kilgore held a match with trembling fingers. They lighted cigarets and stepped from the boat. The shrouded figure followed them, advanced to the black portal and beckoned.

“Come!”

The crafty gift of cigarets had been well calculated. Neither man knew what to fear, what to expect; their fears were lessened, their expectations were increased. They advanced and stood in the dark doorway. Their guide turned and spoke again.

“Catch my robe, sahibs, and follow closely.”

At those words, which for the first time clearly defined the voice of this figure, Kilgore gave a slight start. One would have said that it was a start of recognition; and in truth that low, musical voice held a peculiar note, a singular throbbing vibrancy, which when once heard could never be forgotten.

“A woman!” muttered Day, catching a fold of the yellow cloth in one hand.

The unearthly pallor of Kilgore passed into a violent

flush.

"Impossible!" he murmured, and set his hand against the shoulder of Day.

Their guide laughed—a low, vibrantly throbbing note of woman's music which faded into the darkness of the cavern. The three went forward and vanished; only the glowing tips of the lighted cigarettes stood out from the darkness, paling and reddening again.

For some distance they advanced with impenetrable darkness shutting in on all sides. The cavern turned and twisted, the floor remaining level and sandy. Presently their guide turned a corner and halted. A light appeared.

They stood in a narrow throat of rock that rose to a roof twelve feet above. This narrow throat widened out rapidly into a great chamber which, at the rear, was a good thirty feet in width. The walls were of rock. Set against the long rear wall were two huge vessels with narrow lips, lighted wicks in the lips; lamps, these, which illumined this chamber.

It was less at the rock chamber, however, than at the things it held, that the two men stared in wonder. A number of great porcelaneous jars, containing water, stood about. Near them, packets of food, which Kilgore recognized as taken from his own mess supplies. To the right hand, against the rear wall, were packs—the personal belongings of Day. To the left, at the other end of the chamber, were those of Kilgore.

"This is most amazing—extraordinary!" said Kilgore astoundedly.

"Our own stuff!" cried Day, starting forward.

The voice of their guide filled the cavern with its richly throbbing note.

"Wash," it said. "Eat. Shave. Dress. Then—talk."

The yellow figure vanished from sight.

Struck beyond speech, Kilgore walked forward to examine his own belongings, while Day strode toward the other side of that long chamber with the same intent. The feelings of the two men were unutterable. Kilgore knelt and tore open the nearest pack and stared down at the toilet kit which fell out at his knee. Tears sprang to his haggard, bearded cheeks at sight of the well-remembered thing.

"It's true, all right!" came the voice of Day, no longer sullen and growling. "By Heaven, it's true! This is our own stuff, Kilgore!"

At this instant came a most singular sound, which drew the attention of both men.

It appeared to come from overhead, in a queer squeaking and protesting of iron rubbed against iron. The stone roof of the chamber was rugged and uneven and badly lighted; they could make out little. But from this roof glided an object suddenly, shooting downward with incredible speed, until it plunged into the sanded floor with a loud clang.

This object was a grill of heavy iron, which began at the rear wall, separated the chamber into two parts, and protruded at a distance of ten feet from the wall.

While the two men were still staring open-mouthed at

this apparition, a second grill came down with a shriek and a clash. This grill met the outer end of the first one at right angles, and then ran to the wall on one side. Before the noise of its fall had died, a third appeared, opposite the second, and came clanging to the floor. Each of these grills extended fully to the ceiling, and were formed of closely twisted iron.

Day and Kilgore were now separated and enclosed in iron cages.

"You are welcome, sahibs!" floated that peculiar voice, in queerly clipped English. "Be comfortable. Be happy, honorable nephew of Sir Cecil Kilgore!"

There was silence. Kilgore stood petrified, his face fixed into lines of spasmodic horror. A cold sweat had sprung out on his whole body.

He recognized the voice—too late.

CHAPTER XI

“NO MATTER WHERE YOU HIDE THE EGG,
THE CHICKEN WILL HATCH.”

—Chinese proverb.

Day calmly dropped the glowing butt of his cigaret. He did not perceive the peculiar emotion which had gripped his companion.

“This is more like it!” he exclaimed heartily. “The devil has trapped us—a neat business, too! I’ve seen affairs like this in some of the western hill temples; they got the idea from India, probably, and kept wild animals in the cages. Well, let’s get shaved and dressed, Kilgore. This part of it seems too good to be true.”

Kilgore made no response; he appeared sunk in a stupor of despair. When Day set about unpacking his stuff, however, the Canadian roused himself to follow suit.

"Here's my spare pipe!" cried Day suddenly. "Bully for Esrin! Never mind the iron bars now—we're a lot better off than we were five hours ago, Kilgore. Perhaps Severn and Sir Fandi are alive after all."

At the name of the Rajput, Kilgore shivered. He lifted his eyes for a moment, and in them was a fearful look.

"If we had only guessed!" he murmured.

"Guessed what?" queried Day.

Kilgore caught himself up with an effort, straightened his shoulders.

"Tell you later," he said. "Any weapons in your kit?"

"Not a sign of one. You?"

"The same. Unless you call safety razors weapons! I don't."

Silence ensued. The two men, each in his own barred partition of the chamber, were occupied in removing their rags, in shaving, in searching for articles of clothing. To Day, this singular reception appeared quite encouraging; to Kilgore, it was terrible.

Half an hour effected a huge transformation in the looks of each man. Kilgore remained pallid, his eyes sunken, the square chin projecting more than usual; but he was nearly his old self. Day was more gaunt—he had become a man of iron, refined and hardened in the fire of torture and suffering. His haggard features were harsh, almost brutal, in their betrayal of his aggressive character.

Shirted, trousered, booted, the two came to the grating that separated them and surveyed each other,

cigaret and pipe alight.

"My word, you look fit!" said Kilgore.

"Same to you, old man. How about some grub? That solidified alcohol stove of yours is over here. Got anything to cook?"

"No end; here, I'll pass some stuff through the grating."

They set about the preparation of a meal. Another half-hour effected a further transformation in appearance and looks. The only difference was that as Day became more cheerful and confident, Kilgore became more silent. The two sat side by side at the grating for their meal. When the last drop of tea was gone, Kilgore spoke up.

"I say, have you any open scratches or cuts?"

"A few," rejoined the American. "Why?"

Kilgore passed him a bottle of iodine. "Fill up. Here's plaster—cover them."

"Not much! You have to leave a cut open to drain——"

"Cover them!" snapped Kilgore, a snap of steel to his voice.

Day obeyed the mandate, then refilled and lighted his pipe, and stretched out.

"Spill it," he ordered briefly. "What's on your mind?"

Kilgore tossed away his cigaret, clasped both hands about his knees and stared at his companion fixedly.

"Listen, old chap. We're up against a worse

proposition than I ever dreamed," he said, a note of dreadful calm in his voice that gained Day's instant attention. "If I had known outside there what I now know, we would never have entered."

"I'm a better looking corpse than I was," said Day whimsically. "But have it your own way. Go on."

"You remember that I told you Fandi and I were boys together? Long before my pater came out to Canada, of course. Well, I mentioned having an uncle high up in Government——"

"The chap that woman's voice referred to, of course!" exclaimed Day. "How did she know so much? Thought transference?"

Kilgore smiled.

"Not at all. Cecil Kilgore and the father of Sir Fandi were good friends. Don't mind sayin' that my uncle was a bit of a wild 'un at times. So was the Rajah—Fandi's father. They went shootin' together and that sort of thing. Before my time, it was. Thirty years ago a chap could stir up considerable excitement in India, you know!"

"Thirty years ago? I'm surprized at you," intervened Day judicially. "I've had a taste or two myself of Indian nights, and if you think India has changed——"

He fell silent at a gesture from Kilgore, who pursued his subject quickly.

"No use blinkin' the fact, Day; my avuncular relative did run a bit wild. Well, it seems that on one occasion they went to Kashmir together to look up some ruins,

and they met a girl. She was a pure-blooded Rajput of the royal blood. Her name I don't know; I always heard her referred to as the Rani. She was very beautiful."

"They all are," said Day.

Kilgore made a gesture of irritation.

"When I say that my uncle wanted to marry her," he said sharply, "you will understand that she was more than beautiful. Englishmen don't marry native girls, you know; not even queens. It isn't done. The hitch was that the rajah wanted to marry her also."

"Ah!" said Day with interest. "A duel? The poor girl committed suicide? Broken hearts and the thrill of tragedy!"

"Not yet," returned Kilgore. "As a matter of fact, she was in love with some native and turned up her nose at white men and rajahs. Well, one day her lover showed up with a knife in his side, dead. Whether the rajah was behind it, I can't say; at all events, the Rani swore that he and my uncle had murdered her man. Now, it seems that she had a most extraordinary voice—remarkably musical, with a vibrant thrill to it that a man could not forget."

"And in that voice she swore vengeance?" asked the irreverent Day.

"Yes. Some months later, the rajah's coffee was poisoned; so was the rajah. He died. My uncle, meantime, had returned to England. He got my father and me and went back to India with a knighthood and a seat on the woolsack.

"One day I was in court, a bit of a lad, hearing my great uncle try cases. They brought in a veiled woman who was accused of being a leper and evading restraint—I fancy she had stabbed some one, or somethin' of the sort. At the first word she said, my uncle rose out of his seat like a man daft and commanded her to unveil. She did so. I can remember her face to this day—the most beautiful native woman I ever saw in my life!"

Kilgore paused for a moment, then continued.

"She was sentenced and taken away, but not before I had heard her speak a good deal; she threatened my uncle in a mild way. Ever since, her voice haunted me. It came to me in my dreams, in the midst of a musical concert, in the harmonies of an orchestra—that singular, thrilling timbre such as no other human throat has ever known!"

Day entertained a conviction that his friend was maundering. He should have known better; perhaps it was because he was actually drunken with this sudden return to physical comfort—this abrupt reversion to his former self. At all events, he had been listening in a perfunctory manner, his gaze fixed upon the iron grating which cut off his escape from the chamber.

Now he rose with a sudden movement and advanced to this grating.

"‘A touch o’ sun, a touch o’ sun,’ the color-sergeant said!" he hummed. "Excuse me, most venerable Canuck, but I have an idea. They are rare with me; I

can't afford to lose one." He stopped and examined the grating, tested the iron and rose. Without a word, but with a sudden brilliancy in his eye, he returned to his place. "Now, proceed! You were speaking of the haunting voice. Did the lady die of leprosy?"

"I have always thought so until today," said Kilgore. "You heard me spoken of as the nephew of Sir Cecil Kilgore? That was her voice."

He sat staring at his clasped hands.

Day regarded him for a space in stupefied disbelief and only gradually comprehended that Kilgore was speaking in dead earnest. Then he swore softly.

"Old man, what's come over you? My —, you can't be ass enough to believe that this Esrin is the same woman!"

Kilgore lifted his head, looked his friend in the eye for a moment.

"You saw that bed of saffron flowers? You saw the yellow robes of our guide? Only a Kashmiri would affect such things in this place. I don't say that Esrin is the woman, of course, but I do say the woman is here. I would know that voice again in —."

Day looked at Kilgore, shook his head sadly and rose.

"You believe it, all right—poor chap! You can't make me believe it. So let's respect each other's convictions and be happy. Me, I'm going to bust out of this cage in two minutes. Quit repining, and watch Mr. Day exert his manly muscle, old sport!"

So saying, the American returned to the iron grating

which formed the front of his prison chamber. Kilgore watched him frowningly.

Day went to the center of the long grill and attempted to shake it. It gave slightly. The lattice-work of iron had openings of not more than six inches across. After examining these, Day uttered a low grunt of satisfaction. He seated himself upon the floor, planted his feet apart and against the iron grill, then seized one of the rusty segments of the lattice in both hands.

In effect, he transformed himself into a crossbow, a human fulcrum. He was pitting the strength of his legs and thighs against the strength of his arms and shoulders—and both of these against the slender bars of wrought iron.

His arms drew taut. His legs, still bent at the knee, shoved in a steady pressure against the grill. The curve of his back, the bowed curve of his shoulders and bent-over head, settled into rigidity as absolute as that of the iron segments before him. Inch by inch his legs straightened.

His face became suffused with blood, purple; the eyes bulged terribly. From his lips came a sound that was half a gasp of effort, half an oath of rage. Kilgore stared—it was impossible for flesh and blood to endure such a frightful effort without being torn asunder! Yet, inch by inch, the bent legs continued to straighten. The man had lifted himself from the floor by this time.

Crack! Day fell backward.

“Told you so!” he panted as he scrambled to his feet.

His hands, dripping blood, held out a segment of the iron. "Rusted——"

"Quit it!" said Kilgore. "It's insane—useless——"

For answer, Day uttered a joyous laugh and sat down again before the grill. Once more he planted his feet in position. Once more he gripped the iron, a segment adjoining that which had given way. Once more his body settled into lines of frightful tension. He expended his strength with reckless abandon.

Kilgore, drawn out of his apathy by his prodigious exhibition, came to his feet. He saw Day once again lift himself from the ground, his body bent nearly double, the leg muscles expanding inch by inch. It was too much; he uttered a sharp cry of protest. His cry was lost in the sound of Day falling, the dull crack of iron. It was not the man which had given way, but the metal.

This time Day did not scramble up at once, but slowly staggered to his feet. Triumph had blazoned its mark in his bloodshot, staring eyes. This time a section of the iron had come away, leaving a hole in the grating a foot square.

"Next—time—wins!" gasped Day exultantly.

He wrapped about his bleeding palms some of his discarded rags. For a moment he stood eying the grating with a vast satisfaction, puffing mightily. Then with a final deep breath of resolution he again sat down. Kilgore watched in silence; he no longer cherished any doubt that the grating would give way—he only hoped that the man's body would not give way likewise.

For the third time Day strained. But on this occasion, instead of taking a single bit of iron between both hands, he grasped two separate strands of the lattice! Again he was bent double, again a violent rush of blood suffused his face and neck, while his rigid hands clamped upon the iron—crack! Weakened by the previous breakage, the grill sundered. A yawning hole answered the efforts of the man.

Day did not rise, but sat where he had fallen. For an instant he was incapable of speech. Then he dragged himself to one knee and shook the broken fragment of iron at the grill before him.

“Beat you!” he cried savagely. “Beat you—muscle over iron! Now——”

He paused abruptly as another voice floated upon the cavern chamber, a voice whose thrilling timbre was by this time haunting Day himself.

“Good!” it cried. “Good! Try again, burra sahib!”

From the roof came a sudden creaking and grind of iron. Sudden and swift, an object rushed downward, came to the floor with a clangor and strident ring of iron. This object was a second grating, six inches inside the first one!

“Try again, burra sahib!” echoed that haunting voice.

Day uttered a despairing gasp and dropped again to the floor. He was beaten.

CHAPTER XII

“MENCIUS SAID ‘THAT WAS ONE TIME;
THIS IS ANOTHER.’ ”

—Kung-sun Ch'ou.

For a time Day sat in gloomy silence. At length he picked up his pipe and lighted it.

“I am beginning to be converted to your belief,” he said in a changed voice. “If this Rani woman of yours were here, Kilgore—you think she would squeeze us?”

Kilgore nodded.

“The cards are stacked,” he answered briefly.

Both men lifted their heads and looked toward the entrance of the chamber. The grate of footsteps on the sanded floor reached them. They saw, flitting into the circle of light from their lamps, the yellow-shrouded figure of their guide.

This figure came toward the grill that prisoned them, halted a yard from it and felt with extended hand. Touching the iron, the figure recoiled a pace and then

sat down. At this gesture, at this entire action, the two captives for the first time perceived that the figure was blind.

"Now we shall talk, sahibs," said that same vibrant voice.

"Who are you?" demanded Kilgore, staring.

"I am Esrn," came the answer, with a laugh that rang eerily from the rock walls. "But once you knew me by another name, sahib. Would you recognize me again?"

It was here that Esrn abandoned her broken English and spoke in Hindustani. Kilgore made answer in the same tongue, which Day understood fairly well.

"If you are the Rani—" and Kilgore's voice shook a trifle—"then I would remember you indeed!"

For response, Esrn drew the yellow cloths from her figure.

Kilgore stiffened with horror; Day uttered a low, choked gasp. The thing before them had once been a woman—this much was certain. More, it was hard to say. Leprosy had wrought its frightful vengeance on the human flesh. The creature appeared to be an old hag, yet Kilgore knew that if this were indeed the Rani, she could be not yet fifty years. Thirty years since, his uncle had loved the Rani, and women ripen young in Kashmir.

"There is nothing left of the Rani," said Esrn, a mournful note in her tone, "except the voice. But you, who heard that voice only once, still remember it. Sir Fandi Singh had forgotten it—but perhaps he was not to

blame. I was frightened that day. Nor did I give him any chance to recognize my voice."

Kilgore strained forward.

"Fandi—and Severn! They were here?"

"They were here," repeated Esrin.

"And now——"

"Let us talk of them later." The answer came with a tinge of mockery. The hag again shrouded herself in the yellow cloths. "It will be more interesting now if we talk of you, sahib! Or shall we speak first of the days that are dead—of Kashmiri days?"

In the mocking voice of this blinded, ravaged atom of humanity there lay a dreadful significance. Kilgore comprehended this and straightened up. He was master of himself now, and he lighted a cigaret with steady fingers.

"As you please," he said coolly. "Then the Rani and Esrin are one?"

"They are one, sahib. Do you remember the day when you sat in the courtroom by the side of your uncle? Do you remember that I threatened him and his on that day?"

"Quite well," said Kilgore.

"The threat was well meant. Listen, sahib! My lover was murdered by your uncle and the rajah. That deed changed the entire course of my life. In striving to avenge it, I became a leper. Later, your uncle sent me to a leper's prison. I escaped. I took jewels and fled, with two faithful men who served me. We fled far, into the

north, into this land. And here we came to rest.”

Day intervened.

“Tell her she’s away off the mark!” he said roughly. “Tell her that your uncle never had anything to do——”

“Oh, I say!” said Kilgore languidly. “Why bother, old chap. We can’t demean ourselves to argue with this creature, you know.”

Esrin laughed, and her laughter rang acidly in their ears. The words had stung.

“This creature was a princess of the Rajputs!” she returned. “And she has made herself strong, powerful, feared! And rich, also. What is better, after the lapse of many years she is about to avenge her ruined life upon the rajah’s son, and the nephew of Sir Cecil Kilgore, the proud sahib!”

To this Kilgore returned no answer.

“Your two friends were here—they trapped me,” went on Esrin after a moment. “I shot Fandi Singh. His companion shot me and left me for dead. But I was not dead. I was badly hurt—so badly that I was unable to prevent the escape of the two men. They joined the party of the Chinaman who came to aid you.”

“Sheng Wu!” exclaimed Kilgore sharply. “Then Sheng Wu was at the temple?”

“Yes. He found Fandi Singh, who did not die, and Severn, who lost one arm from blood-poisoning. They could find no trace of you, and they returned.”

“Ah! And they got away?”

“They got away. They reached Urga safely. My

followers at Urga so informed me.”

Day drew a deep breath and relaxed. He had been sitting under tension.

“Then it’s all right!” he exclaimed loudly. “They’ll come back to look for us!”

“They will come back,” repeated this deathly Echo. In those words was a note so sinister, so pregnant with meaning, that Kilgore shivered despite himself. “In fact, they are nearly here!”

There was a moment of silence.

“If you mean to kill us,” said Kilgore suddenly, “why not do it and put an end to this waste of words?”

Esrin laughed—a delicious peal of girlish mirth that was frightful to hear, so bitter was its contrast with realities.

“I have thirty years of suffering to make up,” she answered. “Do you think that this can be repaid in a moment—in a day—in a year? Do you think it can be repaid by the destruction of the body alone? No, sahib! The gods have been kind, by sending me you and Fandi Singh. Why should I hurry? I am not yet near death.”

Day watched the creature in a species of horrified fascination. Kilgore remained cool; the more definitely their position became pronounced, in fact, the cooler he grew.

“You have suffered slightly,” she continued. “Now I have returned to you your razors and the things that make you happy. Why? Because presently you shall lose them again, and suffer the more. I could have ordered

my followers at Urga to kill Sir Fandi Singh, but I chose to let him return here. Let your strong comrade break all the iron he wishes—when he has finished, another grill will descend!”

The two captives began dimly to perceive what frightful refinements of cruelty this loathsome hag was capable of applying to them. The iron grating over which Day had triumphed, only to have a second descend in his face at the moment of victory, was only a slight instance; a symbol. Their return from slavery and torture to all the comforts afforded by their own food and personal effects, was another symbol. Realities would come later.

“Now, sahib, let us have an understanding. I have little quarrel with your friends; it is with you and Fandi Singh the Rajput that I wish to deal. Of course, if you make it necessary to kill your friends, as the Sikhs were killed at the temple, so much the worse for them!”

“Ah!” exclaimed Kilgore. “Then instead of being an execution, this is a parley!”

“Neither; it is a choice. And the choice remains with you. Your friends in Urga, Severn, Sheng Wu and the Rajput, have proceeded cleverly. They interviewed the Hutuktu and obtained his authority to act, also a hundred horsemen. With these men, and a strong party of Manchu soldiers, they have crossed the desert and are now close at hand. They have taken every precaution. They mean to search out these caverns and discover your fate. They think me dead. They do not know that

in their company are two of my men who communicate daily with me and inform me of their doings."

Esrún laughed—this time a chuckle of malicious amusement. Day, thinking of the unsuspecting band of men, began to perspire freely.

"All very well," said Kilgore in a calm voice. "What of it? Your spies will be discovered. Your telepathic communications will be discovered. This place will be found out. What then?"

"If the thought makes you happy, cherish it!" was the sardonic response. "But I would advise you to be cautious. I shall let this strong friend of yours, this American, go free. He shall be found by your friends. Let Fandi Singh hear his tale, then give himself up to me, join you here. The others may return home to Urga unhurt."

Kilgore laughed a little.

"You do not know my friends! If Day joined them, he would bring them here to my rescue."

"The word of a sahib is as the word of a Rajput," came the response. "And if the promise is broken, what matter? Your friends are powerless before me. The race of priests who once inhabited this place had many secrets, which I have discovered. They had much treasure, which I have used. Shall I set this friend of yours at liberty?"

"Let him return his own answer," said Kilgore curtly. "Speak up, Day!"

The American wet his lips with his tongue. In this

moment, he was swiftly weighing the chances pro and con—not of his own safety, but of rescuing Kilgore. He perceived the one great danger. Knowing Fandi Singh as he did, and the highly chivalrous nature of the Rajput, he did not doubt that if he gave a promise, it would be kept by Fandi. He did not doubt that Fandi would return here in his place and trust the others to rescue them. And he dared not risk this.

“May the lowermost — swallow you!” said Day. “I’ll stay here.”

Without a word, the figure in yellow rose and flitted away into the darkness.

For a space, the two white men regarded each other in silence, each of them oppressed by what had just taken place.

“Would you have kept your word to her?” asked Kilgore suddenly.

“Not by a — sight!” Day said frankly. “But Fandi would have kept it for me.”

Kilgore nodded, relaxed his cramped limbs and rose. He yawned and stretched himself.

“Well, I’m for a bit of sleep, old chap. What say?”

“Suits me,” was the response.

Neither man cared to discuss the recent conversation; it was too fresh in their minds.

Kilgore found his blankets, spread them out and rolled up. He was at the point of bodily and mental exhaustion, and in two minutes he was fast asleep. The conversational duel with Esrin had been so terrific a

drain upon his inner self that the reaction was swift and sure. He slept like a man drugged.

When awakened he knew that he must have slept the clock around. The two lamps still burned, softly illumining the cavern chamber. Kilgore yawned and sat up. Somewhere on the other side of that dividing partition of iron Day must be asleep still. Kilgore put out his hand to seize the grating and rise---

An exclamation broke from him. He leaped to his feet, staring. The central grating had disappeared--lifted again to whence it came! The others were still in place.

"Day!" cried Kilgore sharply. "Look here--wake up!"

The American did not answer. With the entire chamber to himself Kilgore strode forward. Half a minute later he realized that he was alone in this place. Day had absolutely vanished.

CHAPTER XIII

“THIS PAPER CURRENCY IS CIRCULATED
IN EVERY PART OF THE
GRAND KHAN’S DOMINIONS.”

—M. Polo

Esrn the leper had told the exact truth. A hundred horsemen of the Living Buddha, with fifty Manchus, were encamped under the orders of Severn, Sheng Wu and Fandi Singh. In addition they had Kilgore’s machine gun, which Sheng Wu had removed from the Temple of the Ten.

It was the singular fate of this weapon to remain untried amid a thousand chances.

The camp was made nearly at the entrance to the long and tortuous defile which gave access to the lake of singing fishes and the abode of Esrun. To proceed to the temple was out of the question. Sheng Wu considered it the abode of devils. Severn and Sir Fandi were

convinced that it contained secret passages through which had come the gas-bearers who destroyed the Sikhs.

In making camp near the entrance to the lake and valley, which they intended to explore thoroughly, the three companions effected a compromise. From here they could search all the hills and valleys round-about for the scattered skin-houses of the Darkan tribe. As a first step, Sir Fandi and Sheng Wu had ridden on with the Manchus to search the temple anew and to bring back fresh water.

Severn remained in charge of the camp.

The savant had become a changed man. His own sorrows lay behind him; he had embarked upon those of his friends. The kindness of his eyes had deepened. A new strength to endure had uprisen in his soul, and he was reconciled to living out his life to its fullness; the peril of cynicism had been lifted from him.

He was unpacking his things when there arose a sudden tumult of alarm. Sentries cried out. A rifle was discharged. Horses were mounted in haste. Severn rushed from his shelter-tent to ascertain the cause, and beheld a man mounted upon a dromedary issuing from the mouth of the defile.

Under his sharp orders the horsemen of the Hutuktu lost their confusion and became orderly. Three of them detached themselves and galloped away to summon Sir Fandi's party. It grew evident that the single man on the dromedary was approaching the camp, and that he was

alone.

Examining this single rider through his field-glasses, Severn uttered a cry of amazed recognition.

"Day!" he exclaimed.

In this moment, however, he kept his head. This might be some ruse; he dared take no chances of a surprise attack. He remained beside the machine gun and dispatched a dozen of the horsemen to bring in the lone rider without harm. They dashed forth on the errand.

Watching narrowly, Severn perceived that Day was not a free agent by any means. The dromedary was unsaddled, without bridle. Day was merely tied in between the two humps which distinguished the Bactrian breed, and he appeared to be unconscious. At the approach of the horsemen the dromedary flung up his head, swerved in his course and tried to flee. A rifle barked and the animal fell. The horsemen closed in about him.

The Mongols cut Day loose, mounted him behind a saddle and returned. It was close to sunset, but there remained an hour or more of daylight.

Severn received the body of Day in his arms, and made a hasty examination. So far as he could tell, Day was unhurt save for a bump on the back of the head—a slight matter. His unconsciousness had not come from this hurt; his stertorous breathing, his deep stupor of slumber, had been caused by some drug.

"Carry him to my tent," ordered Severn. "What is

this?"

One of the Mongols put a sheaf of black papers into his hand. The papers were tied about with a strip of torn cotton.

"It was hanging about his neck. There was nothing else."

Severn examined the papers. They were of varying sizes, from six inches in length and four in width to three times as much. They were nearly black in color. Upon each was imprinted a series of ideographs in vermilion; the papers were clear as if fresh from the press.

When he saw the ideographs, Severn barely repressed a cry of incredulous wonder.

"Mulberry paper—bank-notes!" he said, staring at them. He glanced again at the red imprints. "Issued by Kublai Khan—impossible! These must be imitations——"

They were not imitations; he was convinced of this, even while he uttered the words. His false arm told him nothing; but the fingers of his remaining hand were too sensitive to feel for deception to answer here. He had the instinct of the archeologist for delicate perceptions of patina and fiber. He knew that he was holding genuine bank-notes of the Yuan dynasty, issued in the thirteenth century, yet preserved perfectly!

With an effort, he thrust the papers into his pocket and hurried to the side of his rescued comrade. As he gained the tent he halted abruptly, lifting his head. From the direction of the Temple of the Ten had come

a sustained burst of firing. It ended as suddenly as it had begun.

Severn ordered out scouts and sentinels, then examined Day.

He was not long in determining what drug held his friend unconscious. It was cannabis Indica, that Indian hemp about which so much misinformation is spread abroad. This drug when given internally throws a man into a slumber which lasts for hours or days, an intense and deep slumber. Upon awakening, the victim is in something akin to a subconscious mental state; all power of concentration is gone for a time, and his brain is horribly relaxed. He can repeat, but he cannot think. His initiative is destroyed. Then, literally, he cannot tell a lie.

Severn guessed that Day's slumber had nearly run its course, but it was no time for delay. Kilgore might be somewhere near at hand, and in danger. Sheng Wu and Fandi had obviously fallen upon enemies. The need for action was imperative.

Without hesitation Severn procured a hypodermic, melted a stiff restorative solution and injected it into Day's arm. Then he awaited results in an agony of impatience.

He was still waiting when, with the sunlight gone, Sheng Wu and a dozen Manchus came riding into the camp. The Chinaman's report was brief. They had found a score of Darkan tribesmen encamped at the temple and had fallen upon them instantly.

"Where is Sir Fandi?" demanded Severn. "Did you get my message about Day?"

Sheng Wu assented.

"That was why I returned," and he blinked a little. "Sir Fandi Singh remained with the rest of our men. Some of the barbarians were being pursued and others had been captured. My Manchus undertook to make them talk. I did not care to witness the proceedings."

At this Severn's lips clenched for an instant. He comprehended that Sir Fandi would stop at nothing to get news of Kilgore.

He took Sheng Wu to the side of Day. The latter's eyelids were fluttering. He gazed up at them vacantly, then his lips formed the name of Severn.

He was conscious again.

For half an hour the two men remained sitting beside Day. The latter told a rambling but perfectly coherent story. He had been hit on the head while he slept and knew nothing more. Of the Yuan bank-notes he could tell nothing.

Of himself and Kilgore and Esrin he could tell everything, and he did so. Before his story was half-finished, Sheng Wu arose and summoned the officer of his Manchu troops.

"You will order the Mongol barbarians to remove their camp to a distance of a hundred yards. Place three of our own men as sentries about this spot, and shoot any one who comes near."

The officer departed. Severn glanced up in surprise.

"You heard what he said," explained Sheng Wu blandly. "Esrun has spies among our men; those spies will be among the barbarians, not among my Manchus. That is all."

"Esrun—still alive!" murmured Severn.

"Trapped!" came the hollow voice of Day, who was dimly conscious of why he had been allowed to join his friends. "All she wants—Sir Fandi. No hatred to others."

He rambled along, giving vaguely jointed fragments of Esrun's conversation with himself and Kilgore. Severn might have discounted it as a mad dream, but Sheng Wu, who was an oriental, knew better. He gave a brief and correct exegesis of Day's remarks as the latter went on. Little by little they uncovered the whole affair.

When half an hour had passed the two listeners comprehended everything. Day lay with closed eyes, conscious but drowsy and without animation.

"Here is what has happened," said Sheng Wu softly, blinking at the darkness which closed them in. "Esrun wanted no trouble with us, but desired greatly to have Sir Fandi in her power. She sent Day to us. When Sir Fandi hears this story, what will he do? He will refuse to jeopardize us and will go to join Kilgore—not meekly as a victim, but trusting in himself to effect a rescue."

Severn nodded thoughtfully.

"That seems correct. Well?"

"Esrun's spies have doubtless already reported by telepathy that Day is here," went on the bland yellow man. "We cannot discover who they are; no matter! If

our force attempts to reach the lake, Esrin will summon her barbarians to overwhelm us in the defile. Therefore, we must leave most of them camped here. Remember, whatever we do will be at once reported to her!"

"I see." Severn frowned deeply. "If we are to rescue Kilgore, we must take Esrin by surprise. But to surprise her is impossible. She expects Sir Fandi to come alone to the lake, and there she will be prepared to ensnare him. Why, it's absurd—yet true! To think of a blind old leper woman doing this——"

"Nothing is absurd," said Sheng Wu, and then added, "And nothing is impossible."

"What do you mean?"

"She will expect Sir Fandi. She knows him for a Rajput—a man of honor, a man of high chivalry, a man who would readily sacrifice his life for his friends. She is blind, however, and cannot see him. She will speak with him in Hindustani to convince herself that he is the right man and to confirm the report of her spies here. Unfortunately, I do not speak Hindustani——"

Severn started.

"I do!" he said, and remained for a space in thought.

Sheng Wu waited, patient and quite comprehending Severn's thoughts.

At length the American lifted his head.

"We must prevent Sir Fandi's hearing Day's story," he said, speaking slowly.

"I will answer for that," replied the other. "I will put him to sleep again."

"We must make our Mongols believe that Sir Fandi has gone to the lake, alone. In fact he must go, so that they will believe it."

"I will answer for that, Mr. Severn. He can go—and then return to the temple. In the darkness, that will be very easy."

"Yet Sir Fandi must not realize the truth."

"I will answer for that."

"And," concluded Severn, "the Mongols must not know that I have gone to the lake."

"Right. I will send you off now with my Manchus, ostensibly to the temple. You will ride part way, then send them on to join Sir Fandi, and strike off by yourself."

Severn nodded.

"Good enough. And how will you answer to Sir Fandi for my absence?"

Sheng Wu was silent for a space. Then he smiled.

"I am afraid," he said, "that I must tell our friend a few lies. Well! That is quite all right. It is one of the duties of universal obligation belonging to the intercourse of friends, as set forth in the twentieth chapter Tsze-sze's 'Doctrine of the Mean.' There is only one thing that troubles me."

"And what is that?" queried Severn.

"Your fate."

Severn laughed softly.

"Don't worry about that, Sheng. Give me three days. If Kilgore and I don't return in that time——"

"Then we shall come and avenge your death. You are a person of great virtue, my friend. You are risking much."

"No; I have not much to risk," said Severn. "What remains to me is little enough to place at the service of my friends. Now, I want two horses, a supply of food, one of our electric torches and my revolver. I think that will be all."

Half an hour afterward Severn and six Manchu riders set off in the direction of the temple. One of the Manchus bore a note to Sir Fandi Singh.

Under the fine starlight Severn had no difficulty in ascertaining his position perfectly. When the camp was a mile away he drew rein and sent the Manchus onward. He watched them ride from sight toward the temple.

"I hope Sheng Wu can accomplish his part of the work," he thought. "It's more difficult than mine. I have only to fool a poor blind leper—while he has to deceive both Sir Fandi and the Mongols!"

And he rode toward the defile, trying to assure himself that he would this time be able to shoot down Esrin on sight. In his heart of hearts he knew that he could not do it, at least, without provocation. He had never forgotten the horror that had seized him when, as he thought, he had shot the woman to death—even in the moment when he thought she had murdered Sir Fandi.

After all sometimes these little things count big with the right sort of man. Day could have shot the woman

without a scruple. Severn, although he knew that the life of Kilgore might hang in the balance, tried to persuade himself to do it, and could not.

“We’ll see when the time comes,” he reflected, and spurred his horses onward. “After all, it may not be necessary—she is only a blind woman, a helpless creature.”

This was a mistake.

CHAPTER XIV

“THERE IS HEAVEN SO HIGH,
AND THE STARS SO DISTANT!”

—Li Low.

Severn stood at the shore of the mysterious little lake, whose surface no wind ever ruffled, and wondered why Day had been given those bank-notes to carry.

“It was an ironic jest, more than likely,” he concluded. “Probably Esrung guessed that he was looking for treasure—and gave it to him.”

Noon had come and gone. He had waited here an hour, and nothing had happened. The two horses, hobbled, grazed among the lush grasses to the left. Everything was peaceful, hot, still as death itself. By dawn, at the latest, Esrung must have known that Sir Fandi had started for the lake; she would be so informed by her spies among the horsemen of the Hutuktu. How would she receive the expected Rajput?

Severn had not slept for twenty-four hours. He

reclined under the trees and vowed that he would doze only for an hour. He needed sleep, and he could afford to risk that. He glanced at his watch, set the waking-time in his head and slept.

When he wakened, he looked again at his watch; he was correct, almost to the minute. With a breath of relief that he had not over-slept, he came to his feet. His eyes fell upon the boat of Esrûn, drawn up on shore.

With a start of astonishment Severn whirled about, searching the shore. There was no sign of Esrûn—yet the boat had come here while he slept! Had his presence passed unnoted? Very likely. Where, then, was Esrûn?

Severn slowly approached the boat, suspecting some trick until he perceived that the rude craft was indeed empty, its paddle lying across the thwarts. He saw something else also—a paper on the forward thwart, weighted down with a stone. Concluding there was nothing to fear, Severn pocketed his automatic, leaned forward and picked up the paper.

Upon this paper was written in flowing Hindustani:

Come in the boat to the cliff-opening. I will wait you.

Severn crumpled the paper into a ball, tossed it away and stepped into the boat. He pushed off from shore.

“That message was intended for the Rajput—she won’t dream that others could read it!” he reflected. “Therefore, my appearance in the boat will be sufficient guarantee that I am Sir Fandi. Excellent!”

Standing erect in the stern, he paddled the boat

toward the crags on the right. He had a good idea of where to seek the opening in the cliffs, since he had seen Esrûn come out on the occasion of his former visit to the spot.

He asked himself no useless questions about the matter. He understood perfectly that while he slept Esrûn had brought out the boat and had left the message for Sir Fandi. How she had regained the cavern did not matter. Could she pick his brain with her accursed telepathic power? He thought not. Had she been able to do so, she would never have been expecting the Rajput to arrive. This was comforting.

The cleft in the high rocks opened out before him. He beheld the sandy strip, the rock portal of the cavern, as Day had described; and standing on the sand, the yellow figure of Esrûn, shrouded, blind.

Severn made rather difficult work of the paddling, inasmuch as his mechanical arm could offer little assistance. As he slowly drew in toward the sand, he perceived that Esrûn had heard his approach. The hooded head came up and her voice sounded in Hindustani.

"Is it you, Fandi Singh?"

Severn imitated the accents of the Rajput as best he could; he dared take no chances.

"It is I, woman."

The prow of the boat touched the sand. Severn stepped out, pulled up the boat. Esrûn lifted a hand as if in warning. Mockery rang in her voice.

"Welcome, son of the sun, lord of Rajputana, ruler of the blood of Mewar! Do not think to slay me, or you will never see your friend alive. Throw down your revolver at my feet."

Severn hesitated only an instant. He knew that he could not pistol this creature in cold blood. Only cowards can seek in sudden death, whether for others or for themselves, a resolvent for the problems of existence; and Severn, facing the fact, shrank. Besides, if need were, he could throttle this leprous creature in his one hand.

He threw down the pistol and Esrin picked it up.

"Come!" she said, and moved toward the cavern portal.

Severn followed.

Knowing that to this being both night and day were the same, Severn produced his electric torch as he stepped into the darkness after his guide. He feared some trap designed to lay him by the heels, since Esrin worked not with force, but with cunning. The light showed him little. The passage was wide and high and was intersected by other but smaller passages at intervals.

"Where is Kilgore sahib?" demanded Severn.

"You shall see him presently, lord of the Rajputs! First I will show you some of the wonders of this place——"

"I did not come here to see wonders."

"You shall see what I desire you to see, none the

less.”

Severn made no response. He reflected that, lacking a guide, he could hardly hope to discover Kilgore—the mountain appeared to be honeycombed with passages. He would of course chance it, in extremity, but the time was not yet.

“Turn here,” said the voice. “Follow me closely, to the right!”

Severn swept his light around, suspicious of pitfalls or gins. He discovered nothing and followed into a passage leading off to the right. This proved to be short, and opened out in a large chamber. Here was burning a dim light in one of the ancient massive reservoirs of oil.

“I lighted the lamp in honor of you,” said Esrin. “You came to this country desiring treasure. Well, look around! Take what you will, although I have used most of the gold. When you have seen enough, come and join me, and we will go to your friend, Fandi sahib! Here is the treasure-chamber of the ancient priests, O lion of the Rajputs!”

Severn examined the roof—there appeared to be no grills such as Day had told of, and he advanced toward the burning lamp. Then he paused.

Before him, scattered about the floor, were a few heaps of glinting gold-pieces. He knew what they were, since he had obtained a few from his first meeting with Esrin—they were broad, flat pieces of early Ming minting. This chamber and cavern, then, were not so very ancient!

There appeared to be little of the gold, nor could he perceive other treasure, until he advanced to the burning lamp. Then he beheld a great heap of packets bound in hide. One of these had been torn open. Severn stooped, and picked up a handful of the black paper bank-notes of Kublai Khan, known to the Chinese as Shih-tsu.

Severn choked down a laugh of bitter irony as he glanced around. Here was the vast treasure of which Day had dreamed—the treasure of Genghis Khan, perhaps! Instead, it was some hoard laid by under the Mings; a hoard of bank-notes stored away six hundred years since. A mighty treasure then, it was today not worth the effort of carrying away!

Impatience surged up in Severn. He cared nothing about all this—he wanted only to find Kilgore and get clear. He turned to Esrin with an angry word.

“Enough of this! Where is my friend?”

“Come,” Esrin laughed softly as she turned. “There is another chamber that you must visit, first. There I have prepared a gift for you, Rajput lion!”

Severn followed her closely. These words evoked a swift alarm in him. In the next chamber the trap would be sprung!

His light showed him that they returned to the main passage, then crossed this and entered another transverse branch. As before, this was short and opened into a chamber of some size.

“Is the lamp burning?” asked Esrin.

“There is only darkness,” growled Severn.

No lamp was lighted in the chamber.

"Then it has gone out! But wait—there may be some oil left in it."

Esrn stepped forward, quite ignorant of the electric torch that played upon her. Severn glanced about the place, and saw that in some far day it had served as an armory. Here were fantastic weapons of all sorts, and armor; dust-covered, rust-frayed, useless.

"Have you any matches?" demanded Esrun, turning.

"No."

"Then come! Give me your arm—I will guide you."

Severn threw the beam of light about the yellow figure. He saw that she stood by the wall, and made fast to a great ring in the wall there was a set of huge manacles. At this, a laugh rose in him—laughter, not unmingled with pity for the blind creature who was playing out her little treachery.

He stepped forward and touched the figure with his left arm. Her fingers seized his arm—swift as light, the rusted manacles clamped about the wrist. They had been oiled and made ready for this task.

"The lion is snared!" Esrun stepped quickly away and from her burst one wild laugh of triumph that reechoed dizzily in the cavern. "The Rajput lion is netted! And here is a gift for you, Rajput, a gift dyed with my own hands! Wait!"

She caught up a pile of yellow cloths and thrust them at Severn. Then a match flamed in her hand and she held it up so that her captive might see the gift.

“Turban cloth and robe for the royal Rajput!” she shrilled. “Saffron-dyed, the yellow robes of death! Take them and wear them, great rajah, lion of Rajputana!”

The match flickered down from her hand.

Severn was examining the manacles. He saw that he had no hope of getting free from them; so quietly he began to unfasten the mechanical arm which was bound fast. He could no longer hesitate. The moment for action was at hand. He must stake everything—

“And here is another gift for you, rajah’s son!” cried the woman’s voice. “A gift of leprosy, a gift of death and disease—”

Under the flashlight, Severn saw her leap forward. Horror seized upon him as her hands fell upon his false arm and her shroud was brushed aside. Her teeth closed upon the false hand—she was deliberately endeavoring to bite Fandi Singh, to infect him with the dread living rot that had blinded her.

Severn stepped back. He laid down the torch with the beam still playing. From the woman burst a frightful shriek as she perceived the trick—the false arm dangling loose in the manacle.

In desperation, Severn caught up the yellow cloths and flung himself upon the creature. He looped the cloth about her throat, about her upper arms; the shrouding robe fell away, revealing all her ghastly death-in-life. One hand flashed up a revolver—Severn tore it away and wound the cloths more tightly.

Try as he might, he could not avoid contact with the



awful thing that flung itself about in his arms. Shriek after shriek echoed through the cavern. Esrn struggled and twisted like a mad thing. Hampered by having but one hand, Severn managed none the less to get fresh windings of the yellow cloth about the creature.

He was sickened by the very touch. A mad panic upgrew within him—as when a man touches some repulsive creeping thing in the dark and goes mad with a frantic horror, a desperate frenzy to kill the loathsome thing! Severn cried out incoherently, as a man cries when fighting. He struggled with the creature, wound the cloths tighter, fought back the insane impulse to strike and slay with the first weapon to hand.

Before he finished, he saw that it was in sober truth a madwoman with whom he was dealing. The shock of finding herself so tricked, perhaps, had finished that diseased brain. When the creature sank down at last amid her mufflings, her voice never ceased to pour forth a storm of raving.

It was horrible. Severn found himself shaken to the very soul, as if passing through some brain-searing nightmare of terror. He was not made for such work as this. A violent nausea seized upon him.

The shrieks of the maddened creature had now become low, shuddering groans. Each one of them went through Severn like a knife. He fell to his knees, sick with horror in both soul and body.

At this instant the sound of an explosion roared through the cavern.

CHAPTER XV

“A HUNTED TIGER WILL LEAP THE WALL.”

—Proverb.

Kilgore, finding himself alone in his prison chamber, investigated his belongings.

Since all weapons had been removed, with everything that might serve as a weapon, he had small hope of finding the thing he sought. It was something he had prepared before the expedition started, in the vague anticipation of emergencies.

Presently, as he searched, an exclamation broke from him. With trembling fingers he brought forth from his pack a bundle of bamboo segments, tied together and wrapped in red paper marked with large ideographs. These characters proclaimed that the bundle held temple candles.

Such candles, made of very soft wax or animal fat, and painted, cannot be touched without smearing the hands with color. Accordingly, they are carried in

bamboo segments, split asunder and joined about the candle, the bamboo joint at each end holding the prongs of the candles. Feverishly Kilgore tore open the bundle to let the individual candles come loose.

These candles were remarkable for one thing. The ordinary temple candle melts with heat. These had crossed the Gobi, yet they had not melted.

Kilgore laid them down and rose.

"By gad, I don't dare chance it!" he exclaimed, taking a cigaret and lighting it. "If there's no other way I'll try it—but it's madness. Let's have a look at that grill."

He went to the iron grating that enclosed his end of the chamber. It was out of the question for him to break away, as Day had done, although he found one point where the iron was badly eaten by rust. The idea came to him, however, that he could slide the grill upward again.

He fell to work.

Lifting the iron grating was beyond his power. He attempted to pry it with whatever he found to hand. After working an hour, he had it up two inches from the floor, resting now upon two fragments of a great water-jar that he smashed. This jar was neither of pottery nor of porcelain; it was of the intermediate period partaking of the qualities of each material and was extremely hard.

Another hour passed—an hour of minute and incessant labor. At the end of this period, the grating

had been raised to a height of four inches. Kilgore was setting pieces of the jar in place to hold it up, when the props gave way suddenly. The grating clanged again on the floor.

Kilgore sank down, exhausted.

"No go," he said calmly. "I'll have to take the chance after all!"

When he was rested, he went to the bundle of bamboo segments and sat down. He worked loose the fastenings of the first segment. When the bamboo fell apart, he took out the temple candle, gaudily painted in red and gold and black. Under his hands a miracle took place; what had seemed a candle, became a stick of dynamite.

Kilgore was cool now, cold as death, absolutely deliberate. He opened the other bamboo segments. He stuffed the front of his shirt with sticks of dynamite, fuse, caps. Everything was here with which to work. He fitted a broken stick with cap and fuse.

"The stuff works downward—I must make it work otherwise," he murmured. "If it doesn't kill me, it'll bring down the roof. If it doesn't bring down the roof, it will close up the entrance. If it fails to close the entrance, it will blow aside the grill. And if it does that—I have a chance. At least, I'll enjoy a last cigaret."

He lighted the cigaret. His fingers were steady now. He was perfectly calm.

Going to the center of the caging grill, where the two sections came together, he worked with such materials

as he could find to build up a platform that might direct the force of the explosive against the iron grating. When he had finished he inspected the work with a shrug of doubt.

"It may—and it mayn't," he said, and smiled.

He placed the broken stick of explosive, its fuse ready. With water and sand from the floor he tamped it in place as well as possible. Then he drew out his box of vestas and lighted one of the wax splinters.

"Well," he said, "here's how!"

He lighted the fuse, dropped the match, and ran to the far corner of the chamber. There he flung himself down, careful of the explosives in his shirt.

The half-minute that he waited dragged into an eternity of suspense.

Suddenly it came—a flash, a stunning roar, a blast that extinguished the lamps. Objects came hurtling, smashing, against the walls. Momentarily deafened, half-stunned, Kilgore dragged himself erect, coughing the choking fumes from his lungs as he groped a way forward.

He dared not strike a vesta, lest he behold failure.

At length he came to the grating, and his hands groped at it. A sobbing cry burst from him as he found the iron wrenched and twisted outward in a gaping hole large enough to admit his body. Without hesitation, he dropped and crawled through.

When he rose, he was shaking with excitement. Had the entrance to the chamber been closed? He struck a

vesta and held it up.

"Thank Heaven!"

He started forward. Before the light burned his fingers and died, he had reached the main passage outside. For a moment he stood there in darkness—then, at some little distance, he saw a dancing ray of light.

"Kilgore!" cried a voice. "Kilgore!"

"Here!" Kilgore leaped forward toward the light.

It struck upon his figure and came to a halt. Then it dropped to the floor, and by good luck continued to burn.

Kilgore stared at Severn, a frightful shape. The American staggered and clutched at him.

"Out of this!" cried Severn in a wild voice. "Out of this hell-hole——"

"You're alone?" snapped Kilgore, wondering.

"Yes."

"Day?"

"Safe—get out, get out!" Hysteria shrilled in Severn's tone. "You've no idea what I've done—out of here, I tell you! Pick up the light——"

Kilgore obeyed. He had no idea what Severn had done; that was true. Nothing, in fact, but to tie up a leprous woman—and yet this absurdly simple thing had unstrung and shaken Severn to the very soul. He was still nauseated.

The two men ran. When they gained the cavern entrance, Severn flung himself forward with an inarticulate cry of thanksgiving on his lips. He threw

himself into the warm sand and lay there, clutching at it.

Kilgore dropped the electric torch and looked about. He saw the boat there at the shore below, the blue sky above. He looked at Severn and perceived that the man was sick.

Then, with a queer smile twisting at his lips, Kilgore stepped back into the darkness.

Five minutes afterward he rejoined Severn, who by this time was sitting up and looking about. The American glanced up at his friend.

"I'm a fool," he said, his voice still uncertain. "It was a horrible thing—you can't imagine how horrible! To any one else it might not have mattered a bit."

Kilgore touched him on the shoulder and pointed to the boat.

"Never mind talking about it. Let's go."

Severn drew a deep breath and came to his feet.

They got into the boat. Severn sat on the forward thwart. Kilgore took the paddle and urged the rude craft outward along the narrow water-way into the lake. Once or twice he glanced back at the black portal of the cavern. At length they emerged from the cleft in the rocks, and were heading for the shore beyond. Kilgore saw the two horses there.

At length Severn raised his head.

"I want only to get out of here forever!" he said. "I've had enough. I'm done—"

"Buck up, old chap, we're on our way," said Kilgore

kindly. "Where's Day?"

"Out there." Severn waved his hand vaguely. "With the others. I——"

A tremor passed through the boat—a shivering convulsion imparted from the water. It was followed by a full sound, a thudding smash. Severn leaped to his feet in alarm, nearly overturning the craft.

"Good ——! What was that?"

Kilgore smiled and glanced over his shoulder. Above the crags to the right was rising a little cloud of dust.

"Dynamite," he said curtly. "I blew in the entrance to that damnable place."

Severn stared at him for a moment, wide-eyed.

"But—but Esrin was there——"

"I should jolly well hope she was!" exploded Kilgore. For the first time, Severn heard an oath fall from his lips. In a sudden passion Kilgore shook his fist at the crags. "And let her stay there to eternity!"

Severn sat down, dropped his head into his hands, sat motionless.

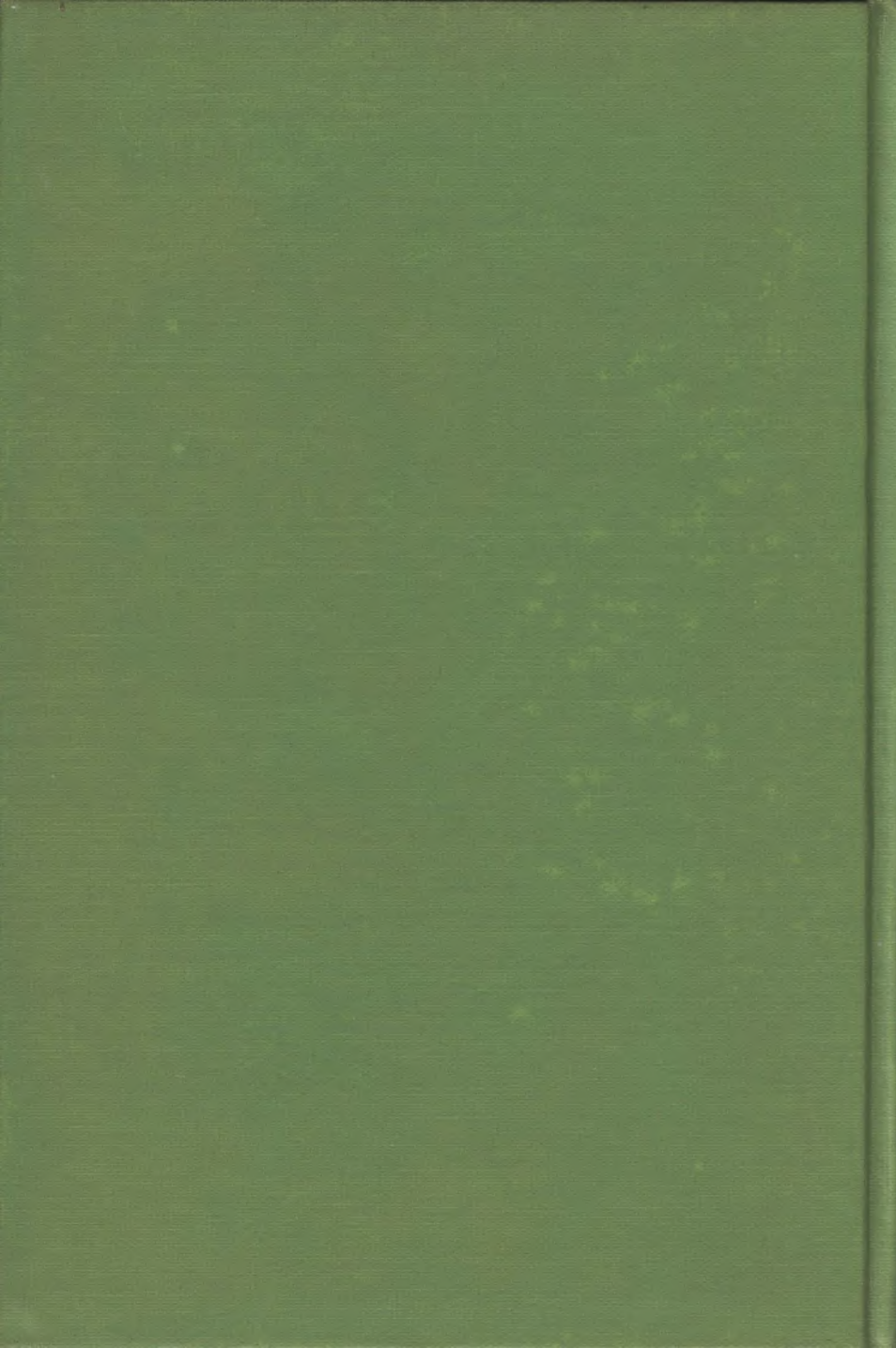
Five minutes later the two men stepped ashore. Kilgore ran to catch the horses. He unhobbled them, led them back to Severn.

"Up with you!" he cried exultantly. "Free, man—free! Let's go"

"Yes—let's go!" echoed Severn in a firm voice.

The two mounted and rode.





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